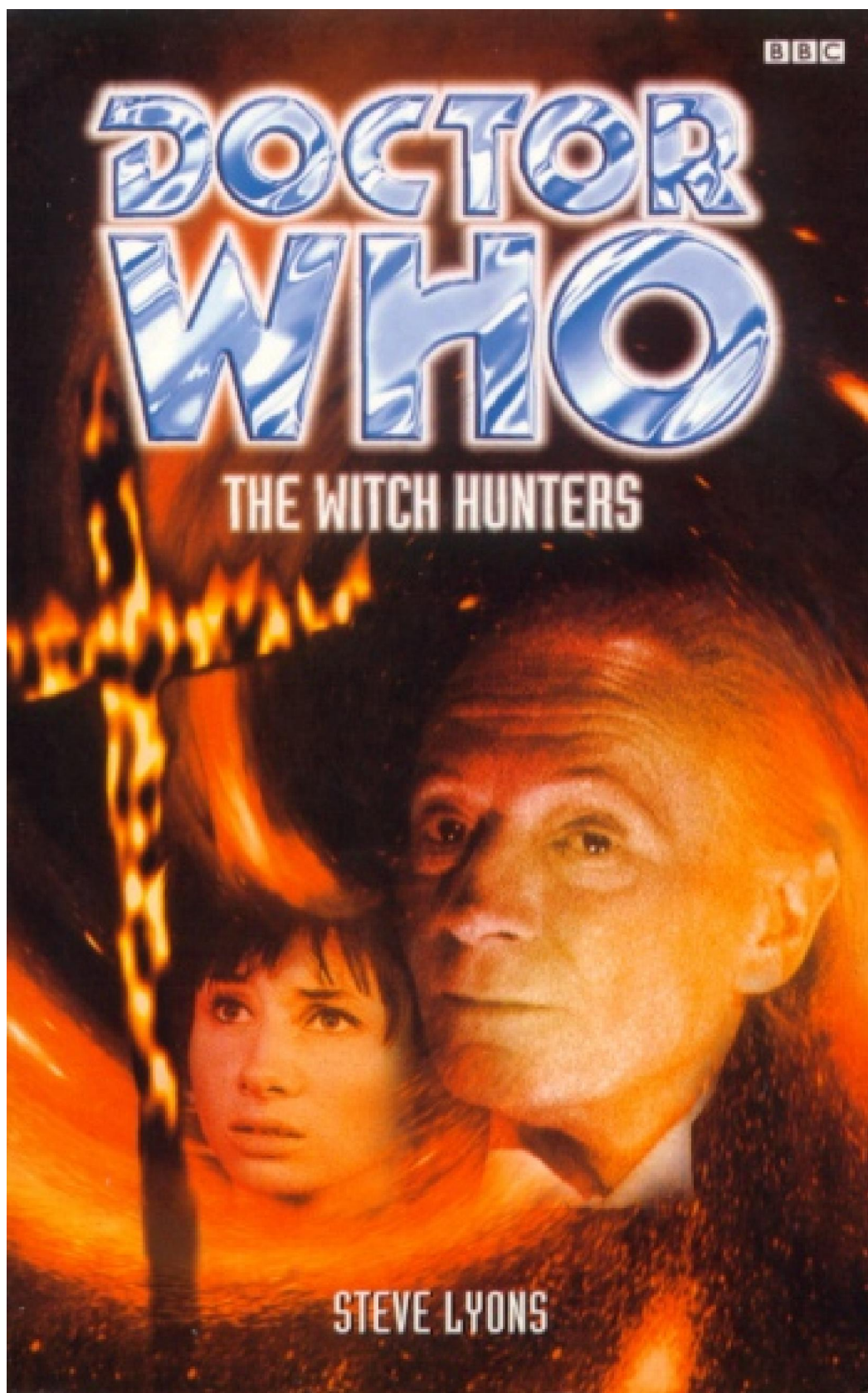


BBC

DOCTOR WHO

THE WITCH HUNTERS



STEVE LYONS

The Witch Hunters

Steve Lyons

PART ONE

BREAK THE CHAIN

14 January 1692

'Susan next.'

'Yes. Susan'

Betty's elfin face was illuminated by a child's glee. Ann, too, beamed her approval. Susan smiled weakly and didn't dare to object. although she was uncomfortable with the attention. She felt she was a fraud for not sharing their beliefs

Abigail held the egg aloft, poised theatrically above the fresh glass She still spoke in an exaggerated whisper - the correct tone. it was felt, for deeds of dark portent. 'We know so little of our strange visitors past. We may at least divine her future:

Only Mary. the eldest of the five, injected ~ note of caution. 'Perhaps we should stop this now, Abigail? Will the minister not miss yet one more egg from his parlour?' Ann shot a scathing glare towards the girl who would deny them such pleasure. Betty wore a similar, almost mutinous, scowl. Nobody wanted this delicious night to end.

'Tituba will keep it from my uncle,' said Abigail dismissively. 'She will say she broke the eggs, if needs be. It

may earn her a whipping, but she will not tell on us.'

'Beside,' said Ann, 'the omens are uncommonly good at this time. Young Goodman Brown from Salem Town saw a demon in the forest two days since, on the hunt. Dark of eyes it was and red of skin:

'Cloaked in unearthly fabrics: said Abigail.

'With terrible horns and hooves:

'Oh. do it, Abi,' chirped Betty impatiently. Go on. do it now

Abigail raised her hand for silence and turned her face skyward. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, exhaling loudly, preparing herself for the ritual.

And Susan could feel it again.

She didn't know what it was. She didn't believe in magic. diabolic or otherwise, but there was an open pit in her stomach nonetheless and her nerves tingled with anticipation. The room was dark, despite the dancing flames of the candles; cold, despite the warming fire in the grate and the sturdy shutters closed against the bitter air of a cruel winter's evening. The tension and fear of the other girls had acquired an almost physical presence. They pressed against her nose and mouth, threatening to stifle
'I would see the future husband of Susan Chesterton;

Abigail asked of the shadows. 'Show us this thing, we beseech thee.' She teased open the egg shell and let the white trickle - slowly, deliberately - into the still water. Susan felt Betty's hand reach for hers, and she took it. Betty clung on tightly, clearly terrified. For an insane moment, Susan shared her fear that the Devil himself might step from one of the flickering silhouettes on the wall, drawn to this group by its evildoings. But she also felt the excitement of disobedience. the lure of secrets unknown and things forbidden, as the silken strands began to weave their

translucent tapestry behind glass

It is a quill', whispered Ann in a voice full of awe. 'You are to marry a learned nun. Susan

No. the spell is not yet complete. said Abigail tetchily. She shook the last of the viscous fluid from the egg, careful not to let the yolk slide out. then placed it aside and studied the patterns with intense concentration. 'The strands are settling. the image is emerging It is a sword, look.'

'Yes, a sword' agreed Betty Abi is right, it is a sword!

'Then Susan is to marry a fighting man:

Aim pouted. 'Are you positive it is not a quill?'

Abigail shook her head vehemently. 'It is a sword. The spirits have given us their answer. What think you, Susan? Would you pledge your troth to a fighting man?'

Susan stared at the glass, but could see only an irregular shape formed randomly by the egg white in suspension and lent illumination by the fire beyond. 'I don't know,' she said. 'I might not get married at all. I haven't decided yet.'

'Not marry?' cried Mary, scandalised. 'Would you become a bitter old spinster, or a malicious beggar like Sarah Good?' 'Or a witch?' put in Ann, a spark in her eyes.

The atmosphere was diffused by cackling laughter: an expression of amusement, yes, but with a hard undertone of spite. There was relief, too, that the ritual had ended without dire consequence. Susan joined in uncertainly. It had been a mistake to hint at her different upbringing and culture, and it was for the best that she had not been taken seriously.

Abigail cleared her throat and regained control of the gathering. She had removed the glass from the table, with a care that bordered on reverence. Now she reached to draw

one more towards her, and produced another egg from the folds of her formal, constricting, grey tunic.

Another? gasped Mary. `Might not the minister be returning soon~

There will be time yet for one more.' Abigail seemed to be fuelled by Marv's worries, to revel in the possibility of discovery.

Oh, let it be me piped up Betty. `Go on, Abi, let it be me. But Abigail shook her head.' `Tis my turn to peer into the future. I wish to know the calling of my husband this time.' The pronouncement was greeted by silence, and Susan could feel the darkness rising again. She became acutely aware of the howling of a lonely wind outside, as cold air leaked through the shutters and caressed her spine. She had a sudden, powerful sense that their actions here - this primitive, superstitious game, as she had first dismissed it - were wrong in the worst possible way. Only dark things and evil could come out of this night's activities. She wanted to leap to her feet, to snatch the egg from Abigail's hand, to scream out that she would forfeit their very souls. But her legs felt like concrete and new patterns were already coagulating in the water.

This time, there was no denying the image that formed. Even Susan could see it, though it took Ann to put it into words. `A coffin,' she spluttered. `It's a coffin. Oh, Abigail, no. No!'

Abigail's habitual confidence had drained away. She stared into the glass with cursed eyes and a deathly white face, and her attempts to speak brought forth only strangulated whimpers. Part of Susan was telling her to step back from this, to hrmg her scientific knowledge to bear, to refute the awful prophecy. Another was screaming that it was true, that the girl was damned.

Then Abigail cried out in pain and swept the glass from

the table with considerable force. It struck the wall and smashed, but the damp pattern as egg and water soaked into the wood resembled a coffin still. She saw it and cried again, toppling backward on her chair as she scrambled to escape the ghoulish image. She hit the floor with a crash. and Mary and Susan rushed to her side as Ann just stared and shook her head and Betty began to weep.

Abigail was thrashing about in the straw, tears cascading down her cheeks, her breath coming in frenzied pants. Her eyes had rolled back in their sockets and her body was seized by spasms. She was having some sort of a fit, and Susan brought herself up short, not knowing how to help. Then Betty and Ann were screaming too and wailing, while Ann banged her head against the table in despair. Susan felt a tide of misery rising in her chest. It threatened to overwhelm her. But how could such a thing be? She didn't believe in any of this. She had never subscribed to the puritanical doctrines of physical demons and immediate retribution for sin; she had considered them to be 'quaint'. She should remain calm, bring her logic to bear, settle the others. But she was losing control, as if some outside force had taken command of her emotions.

'The Devil!' cried Mary. 'The Devil has come amongst us.'

'We should never have done his work. We should never have used the Devils tools.'

She flung herself to her knees and lay over Abigail's pain-racked body, sobbing uncontrollably.

Then something broke in Susan. and she screamed too.

And the first link strained and began to fracture.

16 January 1692

The Reverend Samuel Parris was alone, afraid and lost. He tightened his cloak about his wiry frame, to stave off the chill air and the creeping dread, and he cursed himself for the overzealous devotion that had delivered him into this heathen domain. He had known his course to be unwise before he had committed himself to it - and yet the moon had seemed so benevolent as it smiled upon the besieged homes of Salem Village, and he had taken this as affirmation that the Lord would not abandon his follower to the darkness. It seemed a hollow omen now. The light was stolen by the leering silhouettes of black, gnarled branches. Chains of tangible evil shackled the minister, their embrace ever more inhibiting and cold. The distant hoot of an owl was distorted and amplified, a warning of approaching doom. It was night-time in the forest. For Parris, there was no worse place to be, but for one that lay beyond this plane. He denied himself such thoughts, drawing strength from his cross and reminding himself that he was only doing God's work. For why else would he have been sent here?

God wished him to brave such perils; to risk his soul in the cause of exposing those demons who walked in human form amid his flock. To punish them; to save them, perhaps, from their sins. The strangers had confirmed his deepest suspicions by fleeing into this place, of all places. The minister was only doing his duty. Doing what was right.

But Samuel Parris - for all his beliefs, for all his righteousness - was still a mortal man, beginning to fear now that he may never find his way back to the light. His footfalls were slow and reluctant, his courage tested by each as it sent the crunch of hardened snow on fallen leaves and the snap of twigs echoing like bugle calls to the dark hordes. Surely, he thought, the good Lord could require no more of him than what measure of faith and perseverance he had shown already. The demons were gone and he could do no good by continuing this pursuit. But, even as he halted and considered his route back to the parsonage, a

sound came to him on the newly still night air. The laughter of girls, light and shrill. A mundane noise but one which, coming at this time and in this place, gripped Parris with a paralysing terror that mere echoes and dancing shadows could never have caused. He heard the crashing of movement, the beating of drums and, above it all, a deep voice - a familiar voice? - reciting macabre incantations.

The words sounded foul to his ears, as though their very forms were scratching blasphemies across the surface of creation.

What manner of unholy sorcery was being practised here? There was a light through the trees. Parris headed towards it, emboldened by the revelation of God's plan for him. He had been led to the forest for a purpose. Clearly he was meant to be here, to uncover this affront to Heaven and to deal with its dark-hearted perpetrators.

But still he was unnerved by the grasping black shapes which he knew in his head, if not his heart, to be the branches and roots of old and bent trees. His imagination painted them as monsters, powerful and malign; the spells he could hear had brought the undergrowth to life and compelled it to reach with savage claws, to rip the pure, good soul from his body. He began to wish that he had never left the warm safety of home and his ailing wife, but there was no point in such desires. He was where the Lord wished him to be.

And so. because the Reverend Samuel Parris thought himself to be a good man and brave - and because he truly believed that his God would look after him - he held tight to his cross and forced unwilling legs to take step after faltering step, until he was close enough to see what was happening beyond those trees.

And, as a result, his world turned upside down.

29 June 1692

Rebecca Nurse trembled and her throat dried as the constables lifted her from the cart. People had gathered outside the meetinghouse. Having satisfied themselves with a glimpse of the prisoner, some were rushing to get back inside, to ensure a view of the entertainment to come. Some were jeering, chanting insults, and stones were thrown. One glanced off Rebecca's forearm and tears welled in her heart. Her escorts did nothing. She had resolved to walk tall and proud towards her' judgment, a Christian woman with naught to fear and no guilt to hide. Instead she bowed her head and put her efforts into not weeping, as the chains that bound her hands shook with her terror and the constables shouldered a path for her to the door.

She had never seen the meetinghouse so full. To Rebecca, this had always been a good place, a spiritual place. As a committed church member, she had spent a good deal of time inside its wooden walls, in the pleasurable duty of offering praise to the Lord. Today, those walls were obscured by a teeming throng. The pews and the benches in the galleries overflowed with villagers. Some she knew as friends, others had become bitter foes - and there were yet more who knew little of her but were here for the spectacle of the trial. They masked voyeuristic motives with claims of piety. It seemed to a frightened, frail old woman that a world had turned against her. Distorted faces leered at her, accusing her, damning her, wishing her ill. Their voices merged into a high-pitched, vitriolic shriek in her head. No longer would she find contentment in this cruel, vindictive room.

She was prodded to a halt behind the minister's great chair, which had been turned about to serve as the prisoner's bar. She leaned on it gratefully, taking weight off her weary feet. Before her, stern and impassive behind an oaken table, sat the judges: five of those nine to whom had been granted the power to pass sentence in this hastily convened Court of Oyer and Terminer. Rebecca recognised John Hathorne, who had presided at her initial examination.

She had always felt he believed in her innocence - and yet he had committed her to trial anyway, as perhaps he had been bound to do on the strength of the evidence presented. This wasn't his fault. Still, he avoided her gaze, as if embarrassed to be here.

Chief-Justice William Stoughton displayed no such qualms. He had been brought from Dorchester to preside over the witchcraft cases, and Rebecca knew him by reputation only. In the flesh, he was an imposing man. Harsh green eyes looked accusingly down a long thin nose at her from beneath wispy, shoulder-length, silver hair and a black skullcap denoting high office. Stoughton's glare made her feel like an unworthy sinner to be briefly examined and dispatched to higher judgment. When he knocked on the table for attention and spoke her name in rich, portentous tones, she felt as if he were pronouncing sentence already.

Rebecca Nurse, you have been brought here to answer accusations that you are a practitioner in the black art of witchcraft. Do you understand whereof you are charged?'

'I do, said Rebecca, straining to keep her voice even and loud.

'And what say you to these accusations?'

'I swear before the Eternal Father that, as he is my witness, I am innocent of them.'

Her statement was greeted by hostile cries, and she felt more isolated than ever. She was alone in the midst of her community, faced by suspicions and prejudices that had festered in New England ever since the Reverend Parris's discovery one winter's night a seeming lifetime ago. At first Rebecca had felt only pity for those poor girls who had been found cavorting and performing wicked rites among the trees. Surely they were beset by dark forces, for why else would ones so young and innocent have been drawn into such an evil web? Even Parris's sweet daughter Betty and

his niece Abigail had been ensnared. And, from then on, things had grown worse. The girls' actions in the forest had opened a doorway through which the Devil had entered Massachusetts. They had become vexed by fits, suffering contortions and screaming of attacks by unseen spectres. As the curse had spread, Rebecca had prayed for its increasing number of victims each day. And then the accusations had begun, as the people of Salem turned their sights inward and hunted for the instigators of such unnatural torments.

One woman had already been hanged, and Rebecca knew that more blood would be spilled before the madness could end.

Many of the afflicted girls were in court today, looking haggard and miserable, some shuffling their feet and inspecting the wooden floor. Mary Warren returned Rebecca's gaze with round, frightened eyes; Abigail Wiffiams and Ann Putnam with venom. Ann's mother, also called Ann, was present too. Her fits had been doubly shocking to the villagers, as she was the first adult to be so stricken. It had been she and her husband who had made the original complaint against Rebecca, and sworn out the arrest warrant. Given the bitter land disputes that raged between the Nurses and the Putnams, Rebecca harboured suspicions that their intent was partly malicious. Still, the good Lord watched over both families alike. With his benevolence, she could come through this ordeal and her accusers too would know forgiveness and peace.

But, over the next thirty minutes, Rebecca's faith was sorely tested. A string of witnesses recounted the most frightful tales of devilry to the magistrates and jury. Old arguments with neighbours - and the Putnams in particular - were dredged from the past, each hasty word offered up for examination. Goodwife Holton even claimed that her husband's death, shortly after a quarrel with Rebecca, was her doing. However, there was still hope. Rebecca's husband, Francis - dear, sweet Francis - presented a petition to the court. Almost forty people had signed their names to a testimony that she, of all in the Bay Colony, was so

virtuous as to be incapable of these crimes. Goodman and Goodwife Porter, who had come to interview her on her sickbed when the allegations were first made, had also presented a favourable statement. And yet the worst was to come.

Rebecca was astonished when a fellow prisoner was escorted into the meetinghouse. 'You bring one of us into the court?' she protested.

'A prisoner would normally be ineligible to speak,'

Hathorne advised his fellow judges sagely.

'Deliverance Hobbs is a witch, by her own confession. How can you trust a word that comes out of her head? She will twist your thoughts against me!'

A sudden wail cut through the room as Abigail Williams sat bolt upright, her expression taut with pain. Her voice was distant and shaky.

'Why do you send your spirit to hurt me, Goody Nurse? I have done no harm to you.' She whimpered and collapsed back into her chair, in tears. Ann Putnam Junior began to cry too and some of the other girls followed suit.

'I do not hurt them,' insisted Rebecca, straining to be heard above an outbreak of enraged shouts. 'They are deceived!'

But Chief-Justice Stoughton was not convinced. 'We must rid ourselves of this scourge that has claimed our land,' he proclaimed, 'and this means searching for the truth wherever we might find it. The witness will be allowed to give testimony.'

Deliverance Hobbs was dragged before the bench, looking sallow and bedraggled from her stay in prison. 'I know the accused,' she confirmed when questioned. 'Many times, after I signed the Devil's book, did I attend witches' meetings in the pasture of the Reverend Parris himself. Goodwife Nurse

was present on all occasions, handing out red bread and blood wine.'

'She was a member of the witches' church?' asked Stoughton.

'She was a deacon of it.'

The girls cried out again, assailed by unseen kicks and pinches. 'She hurts us,' squealed Ann Putnam Junior. 'She torments us to make us conceal the truth. She is a witch.'

She is a witch!'

'You see the malevolence of which she is capable?' shrieked Ann Senior. 'She sends out her spirit to bedevil these poor children, even here in God's house. She bewitches them.'

'I do no such thing!'

But Goodwife Putnam was on her feet now, and Rebecca knew that the anguish in her face, at least, was real. 'Six children have I buried,' she moaned. 'Six strong and healthy newborns, of my own and of my poor dead sister's. Oft have I wondered what sins I have committed that God chose to visit such a punishment upon me. Yet now I know their deaths were not his doing, but rather the work of Satan.' A low gasp of horror went up at the mention of the evil name. Rebecca fancied she could see a smile playing about Ann Putnam's lips. 'They came for me,' the storyteller continued - and Rebecca had to crane forward for her failing ears to capture the deliberately hushed words. 'All six of them, they appeared in my dreams. They writhed in pain and torment in that room of hell set aside for those who die unbaptised in the way of God. And they told me: they cried out the name of her who had condemned them with her spells and vile curses. They told me the name of their murderer, and that name was Rebecca Nurse's!'

Ann punctuated her accusation with the stabbing of a long, bony finger towards its subject. And, immediately, the girls were beset by fits again. It was a terrible sight indeed. Mary Warren's legs were crossed so tightly that it seemed they must break, and Abigail fought desperately against unseen shadow demons.

`Goodwife Nurse!' thundered Stoughton, above the cacophony. `Why do you afflict these children so?'

`I afflict them not. I scorn it!'

`They cry out your name. They see your shape!'

`If they see my shape, then it is the Devil who takes it without my consent or knowledge. I do not consort with him.'

`That,' said Chief-Justice Stoughton, 'is for the jury to decide.'

A hush fell upon the room as the girls' fits subsided and the jurors filed out of the building, towards the home of Judge Corwin in which they would conduct their deliberations. Rebecca's eyes alighted upon Francis through the crowd. She acknowledged his encouraging smile, but her heart was weighted down with dread. She was not the first person to pass through this court, charged with this heinous crime. And, in all the trials thus far, not one suspect had been acquitted.

The death sentence had been passed upon them all.

18 July 1692

The final fingers of twilight played across Prison Lane as a procession of subdued girls emerged from the jail. Susan came out last, looking pale and thin and miserable. She stumbled and hit her knee climbing into the cart, but Samuel Parris offered her a kind hand. The Doctor watched from a distance, a hood concealing his white hair and a hand likewise obscuring his features. He wanted so desperately to help his granddaughter, but he couldn't make a move. She must not even recognise him.

When had he started to think of time as a restrictive chain? he wondered. His early adventures had seemed so simple, but now the threat of paradox wound itself about him, ever tighter, limiting his choices. He was testing the chain's strength by being here. If he made a wrong move, he might break a vital link and it would fall away, ruined. But he had to do this. This was the Doctor's fourth visit to Salem, in 1692. He was here only by the good grace of a powerful man, a legend among his own people; a small boon granted after the Death Zone affair. He wanted to deal with unfinished business, before he let his first life end. He had to shake Salem's dust from his shoes and, perhaps, wipe its blood from his hands at last.

The horses pulled away and the Doctor sighed wistfully to himself as they rounded a corner and took Susan from his sight. He had to act quickly now. He crossed the street and banged on the door of Salem Prison with his walking cane. He didn't wait for it to be opened. He marched into the building, back straight, chin up, an understated but unmistakable expression of superiority on his face. He congratulated himself on exuding authority.

A stocky, red-faced jailer scrambled to his feet, brushing crumbs from his jerkin and bustling the remains of a hastily abandoned meal into a desk drawer. The hapless man had been caught unawares by what appeared to be a second official visit so soon after Parris's departure. The Doctor

allowed a small measure of scorn to filter into his voice. 'I have a warrant for the immediate release of Rebecca Nurse into my custody,' he announced, brandishing a sheaf of papers. He had come prepared this time. 'You will arrange it, my good man?'

The guard took the papers from him and, as he glanced over them, a haunted and uncertain look came into his eyes.

'But sir, this woman is in the witches' dungeon and is to be hanged on the morrow.'

'Yes, yes, yes,' the Doctor snapped. 'Do you think I am not aware of that? Now please do as I have asked.'

'But the execution warrant -'

'Will be carried out as arranged. I will return the prisoner to your care within one hour. Two, at most.'

The guard looked at the papers again. The Doctor prided himself on an excellent forgery, although this witless fool was probably unable to read his carefully crafted words. Still, he no doubt recognised the seal of Governor Phips. He was trying to reconcile its presence with his own doubts about these bizarre orders. The Doctor could almost see the metaphorical cogs of his brain working to bring sense to the situation. Then, slowly, like the morning sun mounting the horizon, an idea dawned. 'You are taking her away for interrogation? A last attempt to gain a confession?'

Yes, if you like. Now hurry along, there's a good chap. I don't have much time to spare.' The Doctor reached into his pocket and produced four pennies, which he thrust into the mans grubby hand.

His eyes widened at the sight of what, to him, was the equivalent of two days' wages, and an instant change came over his demeanour. 'Yes, sir, whatever you wish,' he acknowledged, bowing respectfully even as he backed

quickly out of the room. The Doctor tutted to himself, rueing the effort he had taken when he should just have offered a bribe in the first instance.

It occurred to him as he waited in that draughty, inhospitable place that another close acquaintance was being held below. It was an unpleasant thought: he knew too much about the conditions in which prisoners would be kept here. But again, there was nothing he could do. Destiny promised a happier outcome for this friend, at least. The jailer returned, pushing Rebecca Nurse in front of him. The Doctor had forgotten how ill she had looked in those final days. Her dirty, ragged clothing hung off her emaciated body like scraps from a weather-worn scarecrow. Her skin was white and cracked like rice paper, lent colour only by a purple bruise on her cheek. Her grey hair was matted and uneven and she walked with some difficulty. Still, she brightened visibly as she saw him. He shook his head and put a clandestine finger to his lips, bidding her not to speak.

'Must she be chained?' he asked.

'It is for your own safety sir.'

'Look at her, man. She is an old woman, and hardly in good health. She can do me no harm.'

'She is convicted of witchcraft, sir. The iron prevents her from casting spells.'

The Doctor answered this with a meaningful glare. The jailer opened his mouth, perhaps to mention his visitor's own advanced age, but thought better of it. He fumbled with his keys and unlocked Rebecca's manacles. As they fell from her wrists and ankles, he searched his desk for a release form and filled it out with painful slowness. The Doctor signed it with the name Benjamin Jackson, and then took Rebecca's hand and led her out into the now dark Street.

`I knew you would return, Doctor,~ she said, once they were alone. `I never lost faith that you would save me.'

He felt miserable. 'I am sorry, Rebecca.! have done nothing of the sort. You must still come back to this place tonight.'

The strength and hope drained from her arms. She felt limp and beaten now, as if she could not even stand without his help. But she did not question her fate, nor did she give any sign that she blamed him for it. She trusted him. He squeezed her hand reassuringly. `You have already sensed a great deal about me, Rebecca. You know I don't belong here, don't you? I'm breaking some important laws by coming back, but I wanted to see you one last time.' What could such as you want with this condemned wretch?'

'You are important to me, Rebecca. More important than you can know. There is so much I want to tell you - about me, about my burden. About the chains that bind me. I want to show you things. Things I am forbidden to show to a living soul, but it matters to me that you understand them. Will you come with me?'

'Of course I will.'

He smiled and, putting an arm around her shoulders, led her gently towards the main street. In the shadows, there stood a rectangular blue box, into which he ushered her. Despite its simple wooden construction, the box belonged far from the muddy tracks of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, New England, and the waning years of the seventeenth century AD. And, presently, the Doctor and Rebecca too faded from this world. For a time.

PART TWO

THE END OF THE WORLD

11 January 1692

Here we go again,' said Ian Chesterton drily, as he stared up at the scanner screen. What does it mean, Doctor?'

There's nothing out there!' exclaimed Susan.

`Or perhaps it's just too dark to see anything?' suggested Barbara Wright, more levelly. She took a step closer and inspected the shifting black patterns, straining to make out an outline.

The Doctor shook his head, seeming irritated by their ill-informed speculation. No, no. my dear, the Ship would show us something at least if that were the case. My guess is, this is just a small malfunction.'

Ian raised an eyebrow `Another one?'

`Now, Chesterton, as you know full well, my TARDIS is a complex piece of machinery.'

`Even so,' said Ian, following the Doctor into a familiar alcove, `you seem to spend more time at this fault locator than at the main controls. If it's not the fast-return switch, it's the fluid links - and that chameleon thing hasn't worked since we came on board!'

`If you can do nothing except complain -,

`But Ian does have a point, Doctor,' said Barbara. `How do we even know we're safe in here, never mind if there's a chance of our ever getting home?'

`There you go again, with your endless talk of home. Do

you know. I find it quite incredible that, with all the wonders I can show you, you would limit yourselves to one place and time Incredible Ian and Barbara exchanged a long-suffering glance as the Doctor shook his white-maned head and tuned to himself. Still. Ian chose not to press the point. Their enigmatic colleague could lose his temper in an instant and at the slightest provocation. There was something in what he said. too. The Doctor had shown him a great deal miraculous inventions of which he, as a scientist, had scarcely dreamed. But, much as he enjoyed the thrill of discovery, he longed more for the comfort of a world on which he understood how things worked. The adventurer's lifestyle was one he would appreciate only in hindsight, when the uncertainty was over and both he and Barbara could return to their normal, everyday lives as teachers in a London school.

`As I suspected,' the Doctor muttered, `a simple matter of readjusting the image translator.'

`And how long will that take?'

`Oh, not long my boy, not long. A few hours, perhaps.'

`Can we do anything to help?'

`I can cope quite well on my own, thank you, Chesterton. In fact, why don't the three of you take a walk outside, leave me in peace for a while, hmm?'

`We don't know what's out there,' protested Barbara. Susan was inspecting the environmental readings on the central console. `It's perfectly safe, Barbara. According to the Ship, the atmosphere and gravity are standard for Earth.' `There you are, see? You might walk out of those doors and find yourselves in your blessed schoolyard after all.'

I think well wait until the scanners working if it's all the same to you: said Ian. He couldn't help but remember how the TARDISs systems had once failed to warn them of a

radiation hazard on Skaro.

'Nonsense. nonsense' clucked the Doctor. I have delicate work to do. I don't need the lot of you under my feet, complaining and asking questions the whole time.' He operated the door control and ushered his companions towards the widening aperture. 'Go on now, shoo!'

They had little alternative but to obey.

Barbara felt a smile insinuating itself upon her face as she stepped into the forest and smelled its fragrant air. It was bitterly cold, but a watery sun tried its best to penetrate a speckled brown ceiling. She tingled with the welcome sensation of coming home.

'It looks as though the instruments were right,' she said. 'We are on Earth after all.'

'We can't be sure,' cautioned Ian.

'Oh, I know the scent of home by now,' said Barbara happily. 'No other world feels quite like this.'

'We've been here before, though. It doesn't necessarily mean we're back in 1963.'

'I know.'

She refused to let him dampen her good mood. Even the Earth of another era was far better than a Sense-Sphere or a Marinus, to her mind. Barbara counted herself privileged to have visited several periods in history; to have lived and breathed the contents of her textbooks, even though some pages had been perilous. Whenever they had landed this time, their visit would doubtless prove to be an enlightening experience.

Its beautiful,' breathed Susan.

Unspoilt,' said Barbara appreciatively. 'There's no pollution here, Susan. This whole forest could still have been untrodden by human feet before we came along.' Which means we could walk for hours and not find any sign of civilisation,' Ian pointed out.

Wouldn't that be lovely?' enthused Susan, as they strolled off in a random direction. We could have some time off, relax and just enjoy the atmosphere for once. Perhaps we could have a picnic:

Ian squatted down on his haunches and examined the ground. I hate to put a spoke in your plans, Susan,' he said, but the grass here has been flattened, fairly recently - and look.' He produced a primitive arrow, consisting of a sharp stone head tied to a wooden shaft which had broken in the middle. No animal made this.'

Barbara put a protective arm around Susan, as the girl shrank against her side. 'I knew something would spoil it! I think it's horrible what human beings do to each other.'

'Now, Susan, we don't know anyone's been hurt. It's far more likely the arrow was left by a... I don't know, a hunting party or something. What do you think, Ian?'

'I think you're right - and I think we're about to get our proof.'

They took cover behind the trees as the sound of hooves reached them on the still air. Presently, a dozen horses cantered by, a hundred yards or so distant. Barbara strained for a better look at their dark-clad riders, with their tall black hats. As the foliage quickly stole them from sight, Ian stepped out of hiding and hurried closer to where they had been, apparently thinking the same thing.

And suddenly, another horse broke through the vegetation to his right and bore down upon him.

`Ian!' cried Barbara. Susan screamed. But their companion reacted too late. He turned to face the oncoming animal, helpless to avoid it. But, just as it seemed it must trample him, the horse shied, abandoned its human burden, and bolted in panic.

Ian hurried to the side of the unseated rider: a young, fair-haired man of about twenty years. He had landed heavily but was struggling to rise. `Steady on,' he counselled, `you've taken a nasty tumble there.' He reached out a hand, but it was knocked aside ungraciously. As Barbara made to join them, she saw absolute terror in the young man's eyes. He was on his back, but was dragging himself away from Ian on his elbows. He scrambled to his feet, still fixated by the sight of his would-be rescuer, and he let out a hoarse scream and ran, stumbling and almost falling in his rush to escape.

`Now what was all that about?' asked Ian, perplexed.

`He was frightened of you.'

`That much was obvious, Susan. But why?'

`Did you see his clothes?' asked Barbara. `The lack of any frills or colour? And from what I could see, the others all wore the same. You know, I think we've landed in England in the sixteenth or seventeenth century during the Puritan movement.'

Ian looked unsettled. `The Puritans? You mean the Spanish Inquisition and all that?'

Oh, that wasn't the same thing at all.'

Well, maybe not,' he conceded, `but it does show what religious intolerance can lead to. It might be better if we just left.'

Where's your sense of adventure?' Barbara admonished him. `Anyway, the Puritans weren't as homogeneous a

bunch, nor half as bad, as they're painted. They may have had strict beliefs, yes, but some of them actually pioneered diversity and freedom in religion - and they had a lot more fun than most people think. She broke off the impromptu lecture, aware that she was sounding like a history teacher again. Sometimes she couldn't help it: after so many alien worlds, it was just such a relief to be back in an environment about which she knew something.

`Well that young chap wasn't too tolerant of me, was he?'

Barbara laughed. 'Can you blame him? You must have looked pretty strange to him in your nineteen-sixties flannel blazer and Coal Hill school tie. I'm not surprised he was scared.'

`I think we should explore,' decided Susan. `There'll be no stopping Grandfather, anyway, once he gets started on his repairs.'

`And there's no reason to assume it will be dangerous,' said Barbara. `No more reason than usual, anyway.'

Ian gave in with a shake of his head and a resigned shrug.

`It didn't look as if those hunters had caught anything yet,' he ventured thoughtfully. `They were probably riding out from somewhere nearby.'

`Then we can follow their path back to their town or village,' concluded Barbara.

`Just one thing before we do,' said Ian, indicating the fabric of his jacket sleeve ruefully. `I think we should go back to the TARDIS and change.'

Susan wouldn't have admitted it, but the revelation that they had not returned to Ian and Barbara's time had filled her with relief. She felt guilty about this, because she knew how much it meant to them. But their talk of 1963 always made her feel unhappy. She had had precious few friends in

her young life. Wherever the Doctor had taken her, she had been an outsider, ignorant of the norms and customs of one society after the next. She hadn't really minded before, because she hadn't known what it was like to belong somewhere. But she was one quarter of a special group now. They liked each other (for the most part) and they worked well together. And Susan didn't want to lose that group. She liked nothing more than to see her former teachers getting their teeth into a complex problem or enthusing about a historical fact or a scientific discovery. Each time she hoped that, one day, they would grow to appreciate what they had now; what the Doctor could show them. Then 1963 would become a distant memory of an abandoned life. One day.

Her pleasant thoughts were interrupted as she entered the TARDIS and the Doctor jerked away from the console, startled. 'Where did you... what are you doing back here?' he blustered. He muttered vague nothings about how their unexpected return had distracted him. He stumbled over his words and seemed confused, but his companions knew the forgetful-old-man act for what it was by now.

'What do you think you're doing?' demanded Ian.

I was, er, I was inspecting a link, a vital circuit in the, er, the, er...' He put a hand to his mouth and decided to abandon the sentence. Instead, he went on the offensive, his eyes narrowing accusingly. 'Well, I might ask you the same question, young man.'

Susan hurried to the panel at which he had been working, and her dreadful suspicions were confirmed. 'You were setting new co-ordinates. You were going to leave us behind! Oh, Grandfather!'

'Is this true?' asked Ian.

'Well of course it isn't. I don't know how you could think such a thing.' The Doctor took Susan's arm gently. 'Especially

you, my dear. I could never abandon you.'

Of course he couldn't.'! know, Grandfather, I'm sorry.'

`So what were you doing?' asked Barbara pointedly.

The Doctor drew himself up to his full height. He clutched at his lapels with his fingers, leaving his thumbs free to beat against the fabric of his jacket. He was going to preach to them. `I have decided that, since the pair of you are obviously so keen to return home, despite the welcome you have been given here, I should do something to assist you. I was planning on travelling into the vortex and taking a month or so to give the TARDIS a complete overhaul.'

`A month?' echoed Barbara.

`You were going to leave us for a month without telling us?'

`Oh, do apply some logic, Chesterton,' the Doctor snapped. `This is a time machine, is it not? I could have been back here in less than a minute, from your standpoint. A month is little out of my lifetime, but I don't expect any of you would have wanted to sit around for so long waiting for me. hmm?'

But you can't control this ship at the best of times,' The Doctor opened his mouth, but Ian forestalled his interjection~ I m sorry. Doctor, you can't. How did you expect to get back here with such pinpoint accuracy that we wouldn't notice you'd gone?'

'Well,' said the Doctor - mumbling and uncertain again, his hands playing about his mouth, so Susan knew they wouldn't like the answer - `I had intended to use the fast-return switch.'

`The -,

`I know Chesterton, I know. But I have repaired it since -,

`Since it took us back to the beginning of time and almost killed us all. I'm not putting my trust in that thing. It could take you to the other end of the galaxy, a billion years into the future'

`We don't even know where we are yet, Doctor,' said Barbara, her tone more persuasive than Ian's with his accusations and indignation. `We can't afford to be stranded here, even for a few hours.'

`You'll just have to carry out your repairs on terra firma.'

`Oh, very well then,' said the Doctor with bad grace. 'If you want a rushed job, then on your heads be it. But, in the meantime, I'd be grateful if you could leave me to get started.'

Ian looked as if he wanted to say more, but Barbara touched him on the elbow and led him towards the inner door. `Come on, Ian, Susan, we'll find some period costumes and we'll get out of the Doctor's hair for a while.'

Do you trust him?' Ian asked her as they headed for the nearest wardrobe room. Perhaps he thought Susan, trailing some way behind, would not hear. `He can be stubborn. Perhaps we should stay here; make sure he doesn't pull a disappearing act after all.'

`Oh, I think it was just a flight of fancy on his part,' said Barbara. `He knows as well as we do what might happen if he takes off - and, as he said himself, he wouldn't risk losing Susan, would he?'

`I suppose not. I just have a bad feeling about this whole thing, what with that boy in the forest and now the Doctor. I can't shake off the idea that were going to wind up separated from the TARDIS and in some sort of trouble.'

Barbara grinned and linked her arm with Ian's. 'So business as usual, then?'

Ian laughed. 'Business as usual, I suppose.'
Susan liked the sound of that.

15 January 1692

Susan sat by the window of her room and watched as snow fell, leaving wet streaks on tiny panes and making the fields seem unfamiliar and hard. The whole village felt that way today, as the events of the previous night whirled in her head and still failed to make sense. The parsonage, not three hundred yards distant, glowered at her with black eyes of glass. The awful scene in its back room seemed like a fading nightmare. Except that it couldn't fade completely: it frightened her too much. It lurked in the depths of her mind and threatened to creep up on her if she didn't watch it ceaselessly.

Nothing in her experience could explain what had happened to Abigail and the others. She didn't know what had made Ann Putnam run screaming into the night, nor why Betty Parris had sobbed into a cushion for half an hour, rocking gently back and forth. She might have put it down to play-acting or to overwrought emotions, had she not teetered over the edge of the same precipice herself.

She tried to recall what she had thought, how she had felt, at that moment, but encountered a numb spot in her heart instead. She knew only that something had exerted a pull upon her; that she had been saved only by the arrival of the Reverend Parris's slave. Tituba had slapped Abigail Williams out of her fit and hustled Susan and Mary Warren through the door, entreating them not to tell anyone of this business. So far, she had kept her silence. She had slunk back to the inn and said no more than a few mumbled words to Ian and Barbara. The whole incident seemed wrong, almost dirty, and Susan was ashamed of her part in it although she didn't know why. She felt as if she had done something unspeakable; let loose a terrible darkness upon this world. It was hardly logical, but she felt it all the same.

And so, confused and frightened, not knowing what to do and wishing she could be a million miles or years away, Susan sat by the window of her room and watched the

snow fall.

You must get away from this place, as soon as possible.'
`What is it, Doctor? What's wrong?' Barbara tingled with dread as her unexpected visitor pushed his way through the door. Things had been so peaceful here. Were they in for another adventure after all?

`What's wrong? Why, young lady, I would have thought a schoolteacher such as yourself would have known the answer already.' The Doctor swung his walking stick to encompass the world outside the window, and spoke to her as if to a child. `This is the end of the seventeenth century, my dear, and we are in the village of Salem, on the east coast of what is still called New England.'

She resented his patronising tone, but was too relieved to care. Instead, she actually laughed. `I know all that, Doctor. We told you, remember?' The explorers had returned to the TARDIS a few hours after leaving it, as much to check it was still there as to inform its occupant of their whereabouts. The Doctor had rooted out appropriate coinage for them and sent them on their way with instructions not to disturb him again for at least a week. He had always been absent-minded, but could it really have taken four days for what they had said to sink in?

`Now listen,' he said, wagging a finger beneath Barbara's nose. `I've been doing a little checking into this time and place, and I can tell you that a great tragedy will befall Salem Village soon. Things could start to happen at any time. Where's Susan? And Chesterton?'

`Susan's in her room and Ian's out working,' said Barbara.

`But Doctor, I know all about the witchcraft trials, and I can promise you there's nothing to fear. We got a receipt from the innkeeper with the date on it. Today is the fifteenth of January 1691. It's over a year before anything too bad happens.'

The Doctor seemed to accept that, albeit reluctantly after his impassioned warning. He walked into the room proper and shook his head to himself. And then twenty people will be killed and dozens more subjected to all manner of inhuman treatment for the sake of a few superstitions. sometimes, 'Miss Wright. I think there is no period of your history that isn't awash with the blood of innocents.'

'I know', said Barbara. 'It seems that way to me sometimes, too.'

'You should follow my lead and be careful,' the Doctor counselled. 'We can't afford to invite the wrong sort of attention.' He removed his snow-dampened cloak and offered it to her for inspection. It had been part of a costume he had picked up in Revolutionary France, but beneath it he wore his usual ensemble of checked trousers, shirt and waistcoat, His sober black and grey attire didn't look too anachronistic, Barbara supposed. but it seemed rich for him to be lecturing her. It had taken twenty minutes to squeeze into her tight bodice and multi-layered skirts this morning. She longed for the freedom of loose-fitting trousers and a baggy jumper.

'No, Doctor,' she said dutifully.

He continued to chatter away, apparently thinking aloud, stroking his chin distantly. 'Yes indeed, it would take only the merest suspicion that we are not from this era and we could very well become the catalyst to spark off the witch-hunt a year early.'

She frowned and tried to interrupt him. 'I thought it wasn't possible to alter history.'

'Mm? Oh, indeed my dear, indeed. Now, where is your hospitality for an old man, eh? I have been offered neither a seat nor a cup of tea.'

'I think we're a few years early for kettles in hotel rooms. We have water, or I can fetch you a proper drink from

downstairs.'

'Oh, very well, water will have to do. You only have the one bed m here? He asked the question suddenly and sharply, and Barbara wasn't sure if it was meant as an accusation.

Ian sleeps on the floor: she explained as she poured water from a cracked pitcher and thought she would have to go to the well again soon. We signed ourselves in as the Chesterton family from Boston.'

'You did, did you?'

Barbara smiled tightly as she handed the Doctor his drink. He took it and sat down on the bed. 'We're being careful, as you said. The locals would have taken a pretty dim view of an unmarried man and woman travelling together, least of all with a girl who wasn't their daughter or maidservant.'

'And where is Chesterton now? Out working, you say?'

'Another way of trying to fit in. We told people we were only passing through, but the rumours started almost as soon as we arrived. The Chestertons were "hedonistic" and "debauched". We spent all our days idle, taking walks and drinking in the tavern.' She laughed ironically at the memory of but two days distant. 'To tell you the truth, there isn't much else to do around here. There's really no danger, though. A little tension in the air, maybe, but that's to be expected when you're strangers in an isolated place like this.'

'Quite.'

'So Ian signed up for a few days work with a local farmer. Francis Nurse. He went out first thing this morning - and I'm to stay hidden in here and pretend I'm... I don't know. making clothes or something.'

'Well' said the Doctor, 'you seem to have allayed my fears'.

most effectively, Miss Wright.' He patted her hand affectionately to show that he approved of her actions. Now, I should like a few quick words with my granddaughter and then I can return to my own work.'

How is it going, anyway?' asked Barbara, as they stepped out into the corridor and made for Susan's room next door. 'Oh, quite well, quite well. I could be finished within the next few days, if you are all so bored here.'

Not bored exactly,' said Barbara, 'but I do think we've seen everything there is to see. Susan? she called, as she rapped her knuckles against the wood panelling. 'Susan, your grandfather's come to see you. Are you awake in there? Susan?'

There was no answer, and the same thought occurred to both of them together. The Doctor reached the handle first and barged into the room beyond. It was sparsely furnished but functional, as was Barbara's own. The sheets on the bed were crumpled, the pillow askew. The window was ajar, allowing flecks of snow to dampen the wood of the sill.

Of Susan, there was no sign.

A bitter wind whipped through Susan's skirts and lashed snow against her face, numbing her skin. She drew her fur-hooded cloak about herself and was grateful to Ian and Barbara for insisting she bring it. It seemed like hours since she had left the inn and begun to trudge southward, but the Proctors' farmhouse was coming into view at last. At least, she assumed this small wooden building was the one she was looking for. It hardly seemed large enough to accommodate the farmer and his wife, their five children and Mary. But it was just where Mary had said it was, and it was difficult to get lost in a village that had only about half a dozen roads. She was beginning to get used to the fact that, but for the privileged few~ the people of Salem lived in cramped and Spartan conditions.

`Susan,' gasped Mary as she opened the door to her visitor. What could have brought you here?' A shadow passed over her eyes, blotting out the light within. It seemed to Susan that the light rarely shone. Mary Warren was twenty years old and blossoming into a beautiful young woman, but a quality about her suggested greater age. She was taller than Susan, but somehow diminished by a timeworn weariness and by the weight of great responsibility. In contrast, the previous night had seen a more carefree, childlike Mary peering out from beneath the façade. Although almost twice Abigail's age, she had clearly taken some delight in the rituals at the parsonage, if only in those moments when her glee had managed to override her habitual caution. Susan trusted her, far more than she did the bossy Abigail or the faintly unsavoury Ann Putnam.

`I wanted to talk about what happened last night,' she said, knowing she was speaking the words that Mary dreaded.

`A later time would be better. I am busy about my chores.'

`I think it's important,' she insisted. `I don't know what it was that affected us, Mary; but I was scared. I still am - and I want to know what caused it.'

Is the cause of it not clear? We were using the Devil's tools, Susan, and he sent his servants to punish us for our transgressions We are damned now, living out our time God's earth in the shadow of everlasting torment thereafter.'

No, I won't accept that!

Mar's eyes welled up with tears and Susan felt sorrow and, above all, anger that her primitive, irrational beliefs could cause this misery. `Where I come from,' she blurted out, we don't believe in magic. Even the most unusual thing can have a scientific explanation - and I'm sure there's one for what happened last night, if only we can take the time to look for it.'

Then you must come from a godless town indeed,' snapped Mary, and Susan was taken aback by the venom in her tone. 'It is no wonder this world be coming to an end, when people like you invite the Devil into their hearts'.

'Mary!'

Mary's grief overcame her then. She turned and rushed back indoors with a strangulated sob. Impulsively, Susan followed, past the cellar steps and into the main room, where a cauldron of water hung over guttering flames in a brick fireplace. Mary threw herself back into her work, ignoring her uninvited guest. She picked up a knife and began to chop dirty vegetables on a scarred surface.

'Why won't you listen to me?'

'I will not speak with you, Susan Chesterton. The things you say are evil and I will not countenance such blasphemies.'

'I thought we were both damned already!'

Mary spluttered incoherently, lost for an answer. She shouldered Susan out of her path and threw a handful of misshapen chunks of carrot into the pot. Several of them missed.

'Why experiment with magic if you thought this could happen?'

'Why does anyone do wrong? I was overcome by the badness in my soul and I will be punished.'

'You seem so ready to accept it. Don't you want to believe there's still hope? That you might be wrong about this?'

Susan wanted to grab Mary by the throat, to shake her stupid dogma out of her, but she knew it would accomplish no good. 'Listen,' she said carefully, 'you can't really think this Devil of yours would be interested in a bit of fortune-telling,

or that your God would be petty enough to turn his back on you for it. You just can't, or else you wouldn't have gone to the parsonage in the first place. So why not accept that there might be another explanation?'

'We were seized by spectres,' insisted Mary. 'The witches have claimed our souls for their dread master. Did you not feel it too?'

It was Susan's turn to falter. 'I... felt something, yes. But I don't believe in witches.'

'How can you not believe, when they be all around us?'

'Where?'

'Goodwife Proctor is a witch.'-

'No.'

'She is so. I found a rag dolly in her dresser. She puts pins in it to hurt those who cross her. And then there is the beggar, Sarah Good: she lays curses on any who scorn her. And Bridget Bishop of Salem Town, everyone knows what she is. She was tried for it once, but she bewitched the judges into letting her free.'

'You're just being silly!'

They held each other's gaze for a moment, and the passion in Mary's eyes equalled that in Susan's own. Mary gave way first, her expression downcast as she turned her back and resumed her preparations. 'You keep me from my work. I must attend to the children, sweep the hail and prepare broth before Goodman Proctor returns from fetching lumber. He will flog me if he finds me idle.'

Maybe Susan should have left the matter alone then, but this latest revelation appalled her too much. 'How barbaric!'

`No. He is stern, but a just man at heart.'

`He is nothing of the sort, if he hits you. He can't treat you like an object. You should stand up for your rights.' Mary pretended not to hear, which infuriated Susan. She knew she was sounding like a petulant child, but she had to talk some sense into her friend. `Do you know what the problem is with this place? It's that the people in charge can do whatever they like, no matter how wrong it is, because they use silly legends and religion to keep others in their place. They want to scare you into accepting things as they are.'

`Enough!'

If the bellowed command startled Susan, it positively terrified Mary Warren. She spun around, eyes wide, and backed up against the work surface like a cornered hare. Susan turned too, her skin prickling with the dreadful realisation that her temper had made her go too far. Why hadn't she listened to her grandfather? He had warned her so many times about imposing the views of their oWn kind upon those less enlightened. Such arrogance could only lead to trouble.

A huge, grimy man stood in the doorway, his face thunderous. He was about sixty years of age but his limbs were muscular through toil and he had the bearing and confidence of a younger man. His gruff voice held a barely contained fury and his calloused right hand held a whip. `I have heard enough! Mary why do you allow this wicked child into our home? Why do you listen to her heresy?'

'I do not. Goodman Proctor, I swear it.'

John Proctor rounded on Susan, menacingly. `Whose are you, girl?'

`Nobody owns me,' said Susan, sullenly and without much confidence. `I am my own person. Where I come from -`

Proctor wasn't interested. `I will beat the Devil out of you, my girl!' he roared. `Your master, whoever he might be, will thank me for it.'

He took two steps towards her and lashed out with the whip. Susan screamed and ducked, and the leather thong cracked against the filthy wall. Mary burst into tears and fled the room. Susan and Proctor circled. His eyes blazed and she was terrified of what he might do to her in his rage.

`You make this harder for yourself You only show how great a hold he has on you.' The whip struck out again, and Susan darted away and found herself backed up against the hearth. She could feel the warmth of flames upon her legs.

Proctor closed in and she acted without thought. She batted the pot of boiling soup from its hook above the fire, although it burnt her hand to do it. The steaming liquid described an arc and Proctor dodged instinctively. Susan took her chance. Proctor's hand clutched at her sleeve as she hurtled through the door; for an instant, she thought she was caught. But the fabric tore and she was released to run, sobbing, from the house and into the bitterly cold fields.

She raced on, heedless of which direction she was taking. Her path was hampered by snow, her vision misted by tears, and she prayed she wouldn't fall. It was a long time before she dared to slow her pace, or to even glance back over her shoulder.

To her relief, she was alone.

It soon became obvious that the search was in vain. The Doctor and Barbara tramped back up the hill to the crossroads at which stood Ingersoll's tavern. The Doctor lagged behind, finding the climb heavy going. `I'm not a mountain goat,' he complained, entreating a worried Barbara to slow down. She allowed him to rest against her and they stood by the watchtower, pondering their next move.

`I suppose we shouldn't really worry,' she said doubtfully. `There's no crime to speak of here, and if Susan was in trouble with the constabulary we'd know about it by now. Word of that type of thing spreads quickly.'

`Well, I'm glad you're so confident,' said the Doctor, a little haughtily. `From what I have seen of this village, I would hardly describe it as friendly. No, hardly at all. That last fellow we talked to about Susan was positively rude.'

'People aren't mean-spirited,' said Barbara, `well, not in general. They're just insular. They're scared. The Puritans believe that God will judge humanity in 1700 and probably find it wanting.'

A common superstition when the end of a century is near.'

'Exactly. Some of them try to redress the balance by cleansing the world of sin. Others think the world is doomed already, and they live in strict abstinence for the sake of their own souls.'

And still more look for sin in their fellows and invariably find it,' said the Doctor pointedly. `The witchcraft hysteria may not have ignited yet, but the kindling is laid out and ready, you mark my words. And Susan could be in more danger than either of you know.'

`Wait, wait!'

The woman on the horse looked bemused as Susan ran towards her, waving her arms for attention. She must have been quite a sight, she supposed: an apparently teenaged girl alone in the middle of nowhere, face streaked with tears, clothing ripped. `I'm lost,' she explained breathlessly as she stumbled to a halt. `I need to get back to Salem and I don't know the way.'

`Salem Town?'

`No, the village.'

`Then you're wandering in the wrong direction, my child. But you are fortunate, as I am headed there myself. You may ride with me.'

The woman indicated the back of the horse and, with a mumbled thank-you, Susan tried to lift herself over the saddlebags and into the proffered seat. It was harder than it looked. She slipped and dislodged a fair amount of luggage.

Without complaint, her benefactor swung herself easily to the ground and helped to gather up the spilled clothing.

You cannot have seen much of the world outside Salem, if you are unable to mount a horse,' she observed.

Susan wondered if she had aroused the woman's suspicion, but the genuine, friendly twinkle in her eye suggested otherwise. She was dressed in red - a stark contrast to the normally dour garb of the locals - and her kind but alert face and portly frame put Susan in mind of a jolly pirate captain in one of those comic strips she used to read in the early 1960s. It would be easy; perhaps too easy, to let down her guard around this stranger. `And may I ask your name?'

`It's Susan. Chesterton.' Hoping to deflect any further questions, Susan passed the first comment that came to mind. `You're carrying an awful lot, aren't you?'

`A few samples, dear. I am hoping to drum up trade in the village ahead of the market tomorrow. Times are hard, you know. It is difficult for a family to live on a good man's wage alone.'

But Susan was no longer listening. Her hand had brushed against something in one of the bags. She drew it slowly out into the light, fixating upon it as Mary's earlier words echoed in her mind. It was a simple rag doll. And by the

time she had overcome her instinctive alarm and persuaded herself it meant nothing, the woman had seen what she was doing. Her expression had become harder, her eyes hooded.

`Oh. You have discovered my little secret, I see.'

Susan was suddenly nervous. She tried to speak, but could not. She was relieved when the woman broke the spell herself with a reassuring smile. `It is a child's toy, of course. It has no other significance. I do not even know how it came to be amongst my belongings.'

`No. No, of course not.'

The woman laughed then as she drew herself upright. `Oh dear. You really don't know who I am, do you, child? I suspected as much when you first came over to me. Most would be too afraid.'

`I don't understand.'

`I am the "local witch", dear, the woman told her. `My name is Bridget Bishop.'

Ian gulped thirstily from a flagon of cider. He had to remind himself of its strength and tear the drink away from his eager lips. He had become too used to its rough, sharp taste.

He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and turned his attention back to Barbara. `So where is Susan now?' he asked.

`She went straight up to her room after Mrs - I mean, Goodwife - Bishop brought her back. The Doctor went to have a word with her, but apparently she didn't say much. She claimed to have a headache.'

Ian sympathised. He could feel a dull throb building in his own temple. His muscles ached and his hands were sore from a day's intensive manual work. The familiar nagging feeling that trouble was on its way did nothing to improve

his health. Something must have happened,' he said worriedly. 'I hope it's not too serious.

I'm sure she'll tell us in her own time.'

And the Doctor went back to the Ship?'

He said he'd visit again tomorrow, to see how Susan is and to let us know how he's getting on with the repairs: If she is in some sort of trouble, we may have to leave soon.

Ian nodded. He wouldn't be sad to see the back of Salem. Their stay had been peaceful enough, which was a blessing, but there was not much here to interest him. These particular Puritans were more strict than Barbara had led him to expect. There seemed to be no concept of entertainment in the Massachusetts Bay Colony; not many diversions from work and prayer, but for long and surprisingly loud nights spent in the bar of Ingersolls tavern. He stood there now, trying to make himself small amid the throng of unwashed bodies and heard above the clamour of their voices.

It was cold outside, but a fire burnt in the grate and the sheer number of revellers made the atmosphere close and uncomfortable. He was tired and dirty and the prospect of a good bath was remote. He would probably have to wear the same shirt and breeches tomorrow. He could feel himself breaking into a flush, but he didn't complain. It was an interesting life, all in all, and Ian Chesterton just did what was needed to survive it as he hoped for better circumstances to arise.

'We shouldn't be worried here, should we?' he asked.

'I don't think so. I don't know a great deal about this period of American history, but... well, we've been here for days. There's no sign of danger, is there?'

`I suppose not. It's just knowing what will happen.'

`You know,' said Barbara, `even if we weren't a year early for the witch trials, I think we'd be safe. The names of those who were hanged are recorded in our time. If we were among them, we'd have read about it, wouldn't we?'

Are you sure time works like that?'

It's what the Doctor said. Something will always keep us from changing what's happened. Think about it, Ian. Haven't you ever wondered why, whenever we've got into scrapes in our own past, we've always seemed to have such lucky escapes?'

Ian laughed. `What are you saying? That we have some guardian angel watching over us, making sure we don't muck up history?'

`Maybe,' said Barbara defensively. `Oh, I don't know. I'd just like to understand how these things work, I've been thinking about it a lot since we got here. It's like the Aztecs all over again.' She leaned forward and lowered her voice, though it was scarcely necessary in the general hubbub.

`These people will go through such misery - and yet here are we, knowing all about it and powerless to change a thing.'

The sun had given up early tonight, as if exhausted by its futile efforts. The sky was black, but a bright moon lit the snow and lent a serene air to what might have been a perfect postcard scene. The village in winter. But the Doctor knew what lurked beneath the image.

His walk from the TARDIS had been wearying and he had hired a horse for the return journey. He would tie it up outside his ship and use it again tomorrow. But the animal made it difficult for him to move unnoticed, and he did not dare pass into the forest while hostile eyes might be on him. The forest was uncharted and, therefore, evil. To some

of the villagers, it marked the end of the world. They must not see him, a lone horseman, riding across that threshold. He was guiding his mount in an aimless trot. waiting impatiently for an old woman to leave his line of sight. She appeared to be in no hurry. She must have sensed his gaze upon her, because she suddenly met it with a quizzical look. And, in that moment, the treacherous ice stole her footing and she yelped in pain and toppled on to her back.

The Doctor was by her side as fast as his own aged legs could bear him. She accepted his helping hand gratefully smiling wanly as she brushed snow from her skirts. `I am an old fool, I know,' she said, `to be out in such weather. But the village looks so heavenly tonight and I have not many years left to appreciate it.' She did seem frail of form, but the Doctor could read only strength and determination in the lines of her face and her vital green eyes. She had time yet.

`I am just glad I was able to assist,' he said graciously.

`Perhaps next time you should have somebody chaperone you.'

`Perhaps,' she agreed, `but I have not introduced myself. I am Rebecca Nurse, and this is my land.'

She held out her hand and the Doctor took it. `I do apologise, my dear lady. I had no idea I was trespassing.'

`There is no harm done. You are new to the village?'

`Passing through.'

`I saw as you came out of the forest earlier.'

`Oh.'

She smiled. `I have been watching you. It was the purpose of my excursion, if truth be told. I do not think you to be a demon.'

How very kind of you to say so,' the Doctor murmured, uncomfortable and uncertain of his ground. `Yes, very kind.'

`An angel fell from Heaven last night,' said Rebecca. `I watched as its golden trail marked the sky. I knew it was a portent; that God had turned His countenance back towards the colony. Now you are here, from across the edge, too kind and too patient to be any thing of evil. But you should know that some would judge you merely because you are strange to them. You must be wary of their designs.'

`I do know of their kind.'

Rebecca faltered, as if she wanted to ask something but didn't know how. The Doctor thought it best not to wait. `I have to be going,' he said softly, and she nodded her understanding.

`Back into the forest?'

`My home lies..., in that direction, yes.'

`Then I will pray for you.'

`Thank you.'

`What is your name?'

He hesitated, realising that a simple `Doctor' would not do. He recalled the name of one of those infernal twentieth-century musicians with whom Susan had been so besotted. It would suffice. `Smith,' he said. `Doctor John Smith.'
`Doctor.'

He mounted his horse in awhvard silence. and they exchanged a tiny wave as it cantered away. As he reached the tree line, the Doctor looked back and saw her one final time a lonely, silver-haired old woman in black, against the snow.

That was when he remembered what his Earth history books had told him of Rebecca Nurse's fate

16 January 1692

Abigail Williams shrieked as the needle point entered her thumb. She brushed the cloth from her lap and sat staring at the tiny red point of blood. Tears welled in her eyes, not through pain but through this further sign of her damnation. The knowledge that she would be vexed by such had fortune unto death was a yawning pit in her guts. Even the fire did not warm her. She did not belong in such a holy place as this parsonage. The walls within which she had grown to adolescence were unfamiliar and unwelcoming now.

She felt herself shaking and, for a moment, feared another fit might take her. Her vision was beginning to narrow, to obscure at its periphery, yet her other senses were unbearably acute. And then she heard the front door opening and it served to shock her back to the very ordinary reality of the room around her. She tried to compose herself before the minister could see her. But Samuel Parris burst immediately into the main room and Abigail faced him with a quivering lip and moist eyes.

Parris looked as if he had been about to remonstrate with her. His angular face was stern, the pinched nostrils of his beaklike nose flaring. But, at the wretched sight before him, he registered first surprise and then worry.

'What demon besets you, girl? Speak of it!' Abigail shook her head, unable to talk, but Parris crossed the room in three quick strides and seized her by the shoulders. 'Tell me what can reduce you so to tears.'

'Tis nothing, Uncle.'

'It is surely something, if it keeps you from your work.'

'I was merely thinking sad thoughts.'

She controlled her weeping and levelly returned his

penetrating glare. She couldn't tell him about the ritual: he would have banished her from his home for ever. The Reverend Parris was an unforgiving guardian - and only now did Abigail appreciate that what had seemed an exciting game two nights ago was nothing less than a most vile sin against the Lord.

`Does this concern your friends?'

`No, Uncle.'

`Susan Chesterton was here two days ago, I heard.'

`She was not.'

`Do not dissemble, child. I have heard she was from Goodman Proctor. His jade, Mary, was present also. She has confessed it.'

`It is so, but -,

`What has she said to you, Abigail? What has she done?' His fingers dug into her flesh and Abigail could feel tears returning. She whimpered and said nothing, and Parris relented. He released his grip and walked over to the window. He cast the shutters aside and a breath of fresh wind made the fire dance as he filled his lungs with crisp air. His hands were clasped behind his back; his brow was furrowed. The silence was intolerable. Abigail wanted to yell at him, make him say something.

When he did speak, it was in a low tone of restrained menace. `I have heard news of Susan Chesterton. I have heard she respects the authority of neither age nor provenance. She speaks out against our laws and our church. She has proved a bad influence upon young Mary, and I would know with what thoughts she has been filling your head.'

He had turned again, to face Abigail with his direct

question. His eyes seemed to strip away the layers of her skin, looking straight to her tainted soul where all attempts at deception would be apparent. A simple denial would not suffice, but she still dared not speak the whole truth.

She is strange, Uncle,' she blurted out. `An unearthly child indeed. I know not from where she comes, but it is a place in which marriage be considered blasphemous. She entreated us - Ann, Mary and I, even sweet innocent Betty - to join her in magic rituals. But we resisted, I swear it. I said the Lord would punish us for such actions, but she did not believe. She tempted us into evil ways.'

Parris's face had softened now. He nodded as if Abigail had but confirmed his suspicions.'These Chestertons have lived amongst us five days now. They claim to have ridden out from Boston, and yet we know naught of them.'

Abigail tried not to show her relief as the minister's scrutiny was lifted from her. She had a mind to embellish her tale, but thought better of it. Far safer to let him reach his own conclusions now.

`What do you plan to do?' she asked.

`I think it is time to make a call at Ingersoll's ordinary,' said Parris, `to speak to Goodman and Goodwife Chesterton and their wayward daughter. For woe betide that family if they have come to Salem Village only to preach their heresies to my church.'

The Nurse homestead stood on a large tract of land and commanded an impressive view of the surrounding fields. Its windows were shuttered contentedly against the world as it exhaled smoke placidly from a brick chimney. A sundial was carved into the wood above the nail-studded door. By later standards, the building was tiny - it consisted only of two rooms and an additional lean-to structure at the back - but it was clearly the home of an aspiring and conscientious family. The Doctor had expected as much. Rebecca had had

the grace and poise of a lady. But historical texts still referred to her as Goodwife Nurse, and to her husband as Goodman, rather than the more respectful Mr and Mrs. Their rise to prosperity had been met with resentment, and barriers, from certain factions.

There came no answer to the Doctor's first two knocks, and he began to think this just as well. But something made him try again. He used his cane this time, delivering four smart raps to the sturdy oaken surface. Beyond it, he could hear somebody stirring.

'Oh,' said Rebecca Nurse, visibly taken aback by his presence on her doorstep. 'If you are come looking for my husband, he is out in the fields tending his herd with Goodman Chesterton.'

It is to you I wish to speak, dear lady he said with a bow. though not on formal business. May I come in?'

'Of course. I will stoke the fire for you. Doctor, though you must pardon me if I continue preparations for my husband's dinner as we talk.' She beckoned him into her tiny hallway. SAnd I must say, a pleasant surprise though it is, I cannot imagine what purpose you might have in visiting me.'

No, thought the Doctor ruefully. Nor can I.

Salem Town lay on the coast, a good two hours' walk southeast from the village. Its buildings were more densely packed and its amenities more plentiful. Even so, Barbara found little to arouse her interest in the thriving marketplace. The stallholders were selling simple ornaments, cloth, pots, food and, in rare cases, books. She looked over some of the latter and found that, without exception, they were religious texts.

Had she been wrong to come here? Her thoughts insisted on drifting back to Susan, who had stayed in bed this morning, complaining that her headache was little better.

Barbara had considered calling off her planned excursion, but Susan had insisted she not inconvenience herself, and Ian had helped to ease her worries. He would be labouring in the fields again, he had said, not far away. He could call in on her regularly. Still, Barbara could not shake the idea that she had made a big mistake.

`Goodwife Chesterton, is it not?'

She was jerked out of her reverie by the unexpected words of recognition. She had wandered to a clothing stall, behind which stood Bridget Bishop, beaming broadly. Oh, Goodwife Bishop. I'm sorry. You took me quite by surprise.'

`Lost in your own thoughts, eh?' said Bridget, understandingly. `You'll be fretting about young Susan, I expect.'

`Well, yes.' How did she know that? Barbara considered asking, but a shout from the other end of the stall took Bridget's attention. A thin, sour-faced woman was holding up a hand-stitched cushion. She was middle-aged, but her hair was prematurely grey and she carried herself with stooped shoulders and bent spine. Barbara recognised her as Ann Putnam. She had seen her around Salem Village but had never spoken to her, although she was aware that Susan had been socialising with her daughter. The head of the household, Thomas, was an influential figure on the village committee, which made the Putnams a powerful force in the community. But they were also the primary targets of resentful gossip during cold evenings spent in Ingersoll's tavern. Observing Ann's behaviour now, Barbara could see why.

`Three pennies for this?' she cried. `Bridget Bishop, you are a common crook! Why, I could buy the materials and fashion the same item for just one.'

Then kindly do just that,' said Bridget sharply, `and clear the way for my genuine customers.'

`I shall give you two pennies and no more.'

`The price, Mrs Putnam, is three.'

Ann Putnam scowled and flung the cushion ungraciously to the ground. `You have no business to trade with decent churchgoers, Bridget Bishop. The court should have ordered you hanged for what you did. That poor husband of yours, done to death by sorcery - and yet you stand there unrepentant, garbed like a harlot in red!'

`Far better a harlot than a mean-minded busybody with delusions of self-import.'

`Witch!' Ann Putnam hissed.

If I be a witch,' growled Bridget, 'you will soon know of it. I should watch your step, Ann Putnam, lest your haranguing tongue bring you deserved misfortune.'

Did you hear?' Ann demanded of anyone in the vicinity. She stuttered on her words and the skin of her cheeks had been bleached of all colour. She tried not to show it, but she was genuinely alarmed by Bridget's cloaked threat. The younger, larger woman must have seemed intimidating to her, Barbara supposed, but there was more to it than that. `If harm befalls me, witch, there are plenty here who will testify to your cursing.'

Ann turned and stalked away then, a little too quickly. Barbara watched her go and felt as if somebody had dripped icy water down her neck. Suspicions and accusations. It had started already, and she knew now that her only recourse was to find her friends and flee from this place before the inevitable happened.

For the second time, she was startled by the voice of Bridget, all smiles and good cheer again as if her recent confrontation had meant nothing. `Now, where were we, dear?'

`You said something,' said Barbara hesitantly, `about Susan.'

Bridget cocked her head to one side and examined her expression. Then her face fell.

`Oh dear. You haven't heard yet, have you?'

`Heard what?' Barbara could feel a barely restrained panic rising in her chest. `What's happened?'

`Goodman Proctor has been putting about tales of your Susan,' said Bridget regretfully. `To hear him tell, she visited his farmhouse yesterday She scorned our ministers and the teachings of God; she even raised a hand against him. It is the talk of Salem Village, and word has spread even into the town. To be sure, the Reverend Parris or the village committee will be forced to act ere long.'

'Oh no'.

'I felt I ought to warn you.' Bridget took Barbara's hand and squeezed it gently. `I know all too well what it is to be the subject of malicious rumour.'

Yes. Yes, thank you,' she said distractedly The world appeared to be closing in around her, but the distance she had foolishly put between herself and Susan was insurmountable. Why hadn't she followed her instincts and stayed with the girl? `I'm sorry, I have to go.'

`Of course. I will pray for your fortune.'

She barely heard the good wishes. She stumbled through the marketplace, her thoughts assailed by worries for Susan. Suddenly, Salem Town and its people felt hostile. She was being stared at from every quarter, suspected in every paranoid mind. She had to find a horse or something, get out of here as quickly as possible. But her heart was heavy with dread, and she couldn't escape the nagging certainty that she would not reach Susan or Ian in time to prevent a disaster.

Susan struggled to draw breath. The air about her was thick with soot and a cloven-hoofed demon was beckoning her to join it in her own personal inferno. Cackling goblins prodded her with swords and an insistent drumbeat urged her onward to her fate.

She awoke trembling, face buried in the pillow. She lifted it and gulped in sweet air. Thin cotton sheets clung to her moist body and sweat pricked coldly at her forehead. Her heart beat faster than normal. The drumbeat continued, and she realised that somebody was banging on the door.

`I know you are in there, girl. Open up!'

The nightmare continued.

Samuel Parris tried the door of Susan Chesterton's room and was disgruntled to find it locked. What did the child have to hide? `I am the minister of Salem Village,' he bellowed, punching the wood paneffing again, `and I bid you open this door before you tempt my wrath further!'

`What do you think you're doing?'

A man hurtled up the stairs behind him and came to a halt in an alert stance, as if expecting trouble. Parris stared at him and breathed deeply, stoking the fires of righteous anger. Who did this stranger think he was to approach him so? The man was clearly just returned from the fields - his brow was grimy and luminous with sweat, his dark hair plastered down - but he had not the bearing of a common labourer. He was uncommonly tall, and his posture too upright. His hands were soft and the skin of his face too smooth and pale to have been exposed overlong to New England's weather. He was pretending to be something other than he was, and there could be no good reason for such deception.

And who might you be, sir?' Parris asked, inspecting the newcomer with disdain. He had guessed the answer already.

'I might be Ian Chesterton,' said the stranger guardedly.

The Christian name was an unfamiliar one, possibly foreign - but the man had a cultured English accent. 'And you are?'

'I am the Reverend Samuel Parris, minister of this village. I would like to speak to you, my good man, about your daughter.'

'Susan?' Chesterton seemed genuinely surprised.

Parris indicated the guest room door. 'Perhaps we should talk of these matters within?'

'I think you should say what you have to say out here.'

Parris seethed at his impudence. 'Have a care, Goodman Chesterton. You are but confirming what has already been said of your family.'

'Oh, I see. And, on the basis of a few rumours, you come up here and frighten the life out of a teenaged girl? What were you planning to do to her, if I hadn't come along when I did?'

'The girl,' hissed Parris, 'must be made to give an account of her actions. I am responsible for the moral welfare of this community and I cannot allow such as her to corrupt it with her blasphemies.'

'What blasphemies?' asked Chesterton, hotly.'

'Perhaps you should put that question to your daughter, sir - though, in my experience, those of such age can only repeat the beliefs and teachings of their guardians. Do you bring the Devil to our colony, Goodman Chesterton?'

'I don't have to listen to this.'

'You do not deny the charge?'

`Of course I deny it! You want to condemn my family for a second-hand report of what Susan may or may not have done? I thought your Bible said something about being without sin before you cast stones.'

`Your Bible', he had said. Those words had more of an impact upon Parris than any insult his foe could have hurled. They confirmed all suspicions that he had, but filled him with a numbing dread as he realised just what he was in the presence of. This was too big a thing for him to handle alone. He would leave for now - but he had taken the measure of this man, and he would return.

To see him punished.

`The Bible,' he growled as he pushed his way past Goodman Chesterton and on to the stairs, `is also very clear on the subject of how we should treat witches.

Across the marketplace, Barbara could see a horse and cart beginning to pull away. If it was going to Salem Village, perhaps she could buy passage from its rider? But a veil of people closed between her and her prize. She fought to elbow her way through them, as politely as she could - but regretted her actions as she caught a short, spindly woman off balance and knocked her to the ground.

Apologising profusely, Barbara stooped to help the woman gather her belongings. She was searching for stray potatoes and loading them into a straw bag when she recognised her inadvertent victim as Ann Putnam. She braced herself for a barrage of recriminations, but was greeted instead by pitiful sobs. 'My fortune is ever an ill one. The Devil himself sends out witches to torment me.' She turned to Barbara and a fervid light burnt in her watery eyes. `This is what befalls upright people when those sinners who walk amongst us are not weeded out and dispatched to God's justice.'

I'm not sure what you mean.'

`You were at Bridget Bishop's stall earlier. You saw as she laid her vile curse upon me. "Watch your step," she warned, and now it seems her foul prophecy has been fulfilled.'

It was an accident,' said Barbara lamely

'Ann snatched the bag away from her, as if she had suddenly revealed herself to be an enemy of the worst kind. Is it accident that I have lost six children? That so many of our herd sickened and died when my husband quarrelled with Rebecca Nurse? The witches will not leave me and my family be, for we know them for who they are. But far better to suffer their diabolic molestations than to turn a wilful blind eye to it, for that will surely condemn you in the eyes of our Lord.'

She clutched the bag to her chest and hurried away, leaving Barbara more worried than ever. She could almost sense the fears and resentment and spite of a community bubbling up from beneath a thin veneer of civiisation. Everything she had feared was coming to pass. Whatever history might say, the pressures of seventeenth-century life under a strict theocracy in a new, mostly uncharted land were too intense to be kept bottled up for much longer. Something was about to blow.

`No, Abigail, you cannot mean this!'

A part of Abigail Wiffiams enjoyed the horror in Mary Warren's eyes. She had always revelled in her ability to shock. It had earned her a standing beyond her eleven years among the youngsters of the village. But the situation was too serious for her to be distracted by mere childish things.

With Mary's help, she could reclaim her future.

'We have no other option,' she insisted. `It was with the Devil's tools that we opened a pathway to Hell, and it is only with them that we can close it again.'

We may only make things worse!

We are to be bedevilled unto death. How much worse can it be?'

'We might still hope for forgiveness, if we pray hard enough.'

'There is no forgiveness for those who have turned to Satan. My uncle has preached so often enough. No, we must fight against the evil we have unleashed, and force it to release its grip upon us.'

'But tonight, Abigail?'

'We must act before it be too late.'

Mary turned away from her and made a great show of dusting John Proctor's mantel. 'I am not to leave this house today. My master is afeared that I may consort with Susan.' Abigail scowled. She was used to getting her own way, and this time would be no different. Mary was almost an adult now and Abigail's hold on her was slipping, but she would not relinquish it yet. 'You could sneak away once your chores are done and the children put to bed, and Proctor is drinking himself to sleep. Ann Putnam has already agreed, and Betty will do as I ask her.'

'And Susan?'

She had been waiting for this question. She allowed her gaze to drop to the floor, as if embarrassed about what she had to say. In truth, she enjoyed having the older girl hang on to her every word. 'She is not to join us. It is through Susan Chesterton that the Devil was allowed to enter the parsonage and to sink his claws into us. She will betray us to him again, if she be given the chance.'

'oh, surely this cannot be.'

'You witnessed her blasphemies yourself, I heard! She is

beyond saving, and she will only drag us down with her if we try. No, we must do this alone, the four of us. Only thus can we be set free.'

'What are we to do?' asked Mary. 'What do you have planned?' Abigail smiled inwardly. She had achieved her objective, as she always did. Mary was caught on her hook, ready and eager to do whatever Abigail deemed necessary for the salvation of their souls.

'I have spoken with our slave, Tituba,' she said in a deliberately hushed tone. 'She has great experience of such things, from before she came to our family from the heathen lands. She has told me of rituals that will vanquish the Devil from our hearts. I will conduct them, if the rest of you but follow. We should gather at eight o'clock.'

'We are to meet in the parsonage?'

'No.' Abigail shook her head and prepared herself to savour Mary's reaction to her next carefully calculated shock. 'Tonight, we will confront the Devil in his own domain. We are to go into the forest.'

'The fear is,' said Rebecca, grateful for the chance to unburden herself to an expert listener, 'that the Devil has sent his servants on one last mission, to tempt us into wicked ways before the Day of Judgment. Lord grant us the strength to resist their wiles.'

'I cannot imagine how one so virtuous as yourself could fail any sort of a test.'

'It is kind of you to say as much, Doctor, and yet still there are those who harbour evil thoughts. How can we have served God well that cannot convert those sinners to his side?'

'Any god can expect only so much,' said the Doctor.

His tone was persuasive, and she wanted so much to

believe him. She hadn't pried into her visitor's origins, but she had discerned that he was unfamiliar with the laws and customs of this colony and perhaps of the material plane. It seemed far-fetched to think of him as an angel - and pompous to imagine that an angel would appear to her of all people - but there was something special about him. Something mysterious, indefinable.

It felt odd to have this enigma seated in the familiar surroundings of her downstairs room, chin resting on steepled fingers as he spoke quietly and thoughtfully and with great wisdom. The fire lit one side of his face but cast the other into shadow, and this dichotomy seemed somehow symbolic. It occurred to her that she ought to suspect his motives, but she had not lived so long without becoming an instinctive judge of character. He meant nobody harm; she would have staked her life on that.

`All the same,' she said, "tis a worry.'

`Well it needn't be.'

`You think we may be judged worthy?'

`I don't think the world is about to come to an end.' He was couching his words carefully, as always. `I think it might just be around for a good many years yet.'

`If you think as much, then I shall try to believe.'

I'm glad. You know, Rebecca, you don't have to live in fear. It's quite acceptable to enjoy liue~ to take the gifts that Nature, and even other people, can give to you. Quite acceptable.'

`I know I should have more faith. It is merely that there have been so many portents of late: words spoken in haste, accusations hurled. The winter has been hard, and rain scarce. We all fear the coming of drought. Even were it not but eight years to the turning of the century, I should be wary.'

Her words had a strange effect upon the Doctor. 'Eight years?' he repeated, and he cocked his head so that the shadow fell across the whole of his face. Only his eyes remained, twinkling with a new alertness. And his voice, betraying a mounting but controlled panic. 'Eight years? My good woman, what year is this now? Tell me, hurry'.

Somehow it seemed only logical that he did not know. 'It is the Year of Our Lord sixteen hundred and ninety-two,' she replied, 'or ninety-one as some still count it. It is not long since that the date of the New Year was changed'.

And now the Doctor was standing bolt upright, his eyes wide and staring, his jaw set in grim determination. 'I have to leave,' he said simply, surprising Rebecca with his brusqueness.

'Have I done aught wrong?

'Oh no, no,' he hastened to assure her as he made for the door. His air of self-confidence seemed to have drained away, and he was just a confused old man now. Your company has been delightful, Goodwife Nurse, but I have my companions to... to... I must attend to. Its the web of history you see, hmm, yes, well, quite. Goodbye. Before she had even started to unravel his garbled words, he was back on her doorstep and holding out a hand. She reciprocated and he kissed her knuckles gently, then smiled at her. For a second, the kind, clever old Doctor was back. Then his face changed again, as if he no longer even recognised her, and he hurried off across the fields, muttering all the while to himself.

She wondered if she would see him again, but felt with all her heart and soul that she would. I will keep a watch for more lights in the sky, she called after him hopefully. But he was already gone.

They all converged, finally, in Ian and Barbara's room at Ingersoll's tavern. Ian had coaxed Susan's story from her

and he relayed the salient details to the Doctor, who, after a cursory amount of tutting and scolding, wrapped a protective arm about the frightened child. Ian had wanted to search for Barbara, but the Doctor had advised keeping a low profile. She arrived, at last, out of breath but grateful to find everybody safe. Ian welcomed her with a warm smile, though his stomach was still tight with worry. They weren't out of danger yet.

`I assume we're all agreed,' he said. `We're attracting too much attention here, and we now know it can only be a matter of days before the witch-hunt gets into full swing. We should leave right away.'

`I'll second that,' said Barbara heartily. Susan just nodded.

'Now hold on a minute, my boy, let's not be so hasty said the Doctor. `You argued with the Reverend Parris, I believe, and Susan here has been the subject of lurid chit-chat all day. I think it very unlikely we can escape from this village unnoticed, don't you?'

Who cares,' said Barbara, `so long as we do escape?'

*But that, my dear Miss Wright. is the nub of the problem, isn't it? You see, to get back to the TARDIS, we have to return to the forest. And the forest, to the minds of these people, is pure evil. It is the Devil's greatest stronghold on Earth, no less. If we were to be seen heading into that land, we would be seized and imprisoned, and they'd no doubt throw away the key.' There was a smile on the Doctor's face and his eyebrows were raised. He almost seemed to be enjoying this chance to demonstrate his keen intellect. Ian took a deep breath and fought not to display his own irritation. The most annoying thing of all was that his colleague was right.

`But that hunting party went into the forest,' Susan recalled.

`All yes, but then the need for food makes brave men of the most cowardly of us,' said the Doctor with an indulgent smile, `and I very much doubt any of them hunted alone. Remember, Susan, we are on the New England coast. The settlers here have come from across the ocean, and as yet they haven't travelled very far to the west. All they know of the forest is that, every so often, hordes of very unhappy natives come rampaging out of it. intent upon slaughter'

`But even so,' said Ian, `the Devils greatest stronghold? They can't seriously believe that.

This is the seventeenth century, my dear boy. Diabolism is a fact of life here. I would have thought you'd appreciate that by now.'

It certainly is,' said Barbara, wrapping her arms about herself Ian wondered what she had experienced to make her so certain. `But all this talk isn't getting us any closer to the TARDIS.'

`No,' said the Doctor, `no, you're quite right, Barbara. We need a plan - and here's what I think we should do.'

The moon was bright, and Samuel Parris could keep a good distance between himself and the three strangers. He did not want to be seen yet. They were clearly engaged in mischief of a sort, and he would know what it was. Their cohort, Ian Chesterton, had already left the ordinary, mounting a horse and drawing off the constables whom Parris had left on watch. He had returned home to await their report, until divine providence had allowed him to catch sight of the wife and the daughter and the white-haired old man, scurrying past the parsonage a full ten minutes later. Chesterton's flight had been but a diversion so that his kin could attend what Parris could only imagine to be a witches' church. The thought excited him: if he could find the site of such a blasphemy and observe it, he could identify its members. Not that he wasn't sure of the identities of most already.

But then the strangers took a most unexpected turn. They headed into the forest, without even pause to consider its dangers. Parris felt a cold lump forming in his throat. If he followed them, he would be at their mercy, alone in the land of their master. His legs were unwilling to carry him, but an inner voice goaded him onward. This could be the making of his reputation. He was on the verge of routing all evil from his parish, and after all it was by God's will that he had come this far. He could not shirk his responsibilities now. And so, the Reverend Samuel Parris took one last look at the moon and at the simple wooden buildings of home. He held on to the cross beneath his voluminous cloak and muttered a hopeful prayer. And he strode purposefully into the Devil's domain and, in so doing, enwrapped himself inextricably in history's chains.

9 November 1954

Over three and a half centuries passed. Then it happened again. Once more, the trials of Salem Village began in its minister's own home, with the discovery that a doorway had been opened to the Devil. Once more, the most vulnerable members of the community, its children, were beset by agonising fits that were awful to behold. Once more, the elders looked for the perpetrators of such evil among their own numbers. And, once more, too many people were cast into dark and cramped cells, held in the cruellest conditions and eventually sentenced to hang on charges of witchcraft.

This time, thankfully, nobody died. The events of 1692

were being re-created on stage: a horrific chapter of history replayed as entertainment, with perhaps a moral to convey to its audience. Susan sat, tight-lipped, twelve rows back and nine seats along, spellbound by the unfolding drama. But *The Crucible* affected her in ways that the playwright Arthur Miller could scarcely have imagined when he first set pen to paper.

Susan found no enjoyment in the performance. She cried as John Proctor and Rebecca Nurse went to their deaths in its final act, thanks in part to the accusations of Abigail Williams and Mary Warren. She wiped the tears from her face and hoped her grandfather wouldn't see them. But as the curtains dropped and the theatre erupted into applause, she felt his inscrutable eyes upon her.

Susan? What's wrong. child?

Grandfather, how could they do such things to each other?' She was stammering with the effort of forcing out the words. 'It's horrible!'

He said nothing. He just laid a hand on hers, but she shrugged it away. She couldn't bear his comfort, didn't want

to hear his platitudes. Why hadn't he told her about this before? Why hadn't they done something when they had the chance?

'I've got to get out.' Her voice caught and her eyes were misting over. She left her seat before he could stop her, ignoring him as he called after her angrily. She pushed her way down the row. A middle-aged woman yelped in protest and commented on the manners of the younger generation these days. Susan paid her no heed.

Outside, the scent of fresh rainfall hit her nostrils. The moon bounced shimmering cascades of light off droplets of water on the cobbles. Her feet pounded along paving stones and splashed black puddles up her legs, soaking her stockings. She didn't care. She just kept on running. She had to leave the theatre behind, as if that could lessen the impact of what she had seen. She stopped only when she could run no more, leaning out of breath against the wall of a nearby chemists shop and staring sightlessly into the star-freckled sky. Chaotic images chased each other through the caverns of her mind, but one thought emerged strongly. Twenr~ people had died Twenty people executed for the ludicrous crime of witchcraft, effectively murdered by the superstitions of a backwater village at the back end of a bygone century. Twenty people, some of whom she had met and talked to days before. Twenty people. How could that be? Why couldn't it have been stopped?

Susan knew what she had to do, her newfound purpose damming the floods of her tears. She had to go back. To Salem, to 1692, before it began. Grandfather would caution her against it: he would say that what she had planned was impossible. He would remind her of their tribulations in Mexico. But why? They had done so much good, so many times on so many worlds. Why not this time? Why couldn't they provide a much-needed voice of reason? Put an end to the madness before it began? Save lives and prevent untold suffering? Help those who had become, for however short a time, their friends?

Why couldn't they change history?

'In 1954,' said Barbara reflectively, 'I was a student teacher in Cricklewood, living in a rented room.'

'Winston Churchill was still Prime Minister,' recalled Ian.

'If I was to catch a train to London tomorrow and take a walk around the park behind my old flat I could probably find myself sitting by the duck pond marking homework. I could tell myself what the next nine years have in store. What to look forward to, who to avoid.'

'Except,' Ian reminded her, 'the Doctor made us promise not to do anything like that, and he seemed serious.' They were seated on a wooden bench, hardly minding the cold and the damp after a few days in Salem's more severe weather. The bright interior of a nearby public house beckoned to them, but they had both wanted to enjoy the night air. They were home at last. Not back in 1963, but on familiar ground for the first time in too long.

'You know what the Doctor's like,' said Barbara. 'All his prophecies of doom if somebody wants to do something he doesn't agree with. He probably just wants to keep us from warning ourselves not to go to that junkyard or step into his wretched Ship.'

Ian laughed at the thought. 'He's not really so calculating, is he? I thought he'd mellowed a bit since we first met him.'

'I don't know, Ian. He hasn't taken us home yet, has he? He just keeps on making empty promises, like when we left Salem. He said it would work this time.' She had thought herself over the initial frustration of her disappointment, but her voice betrayed it.

'And it will do, someday,' said Ian gently. 'We're closer than we've ever been. And it isn't really the Doctor's fault - he's never been able to control the TARDIS, has he?'

`Hasn't he? Sometimes I wonder. Take now, for instance.

He starts to tell Susan about The Crucible, and the next thing we know we're in Bristol on the day it opens.'

`Serendipity?'

`I hope so.'

`But the Ship has a mind of its own, too, said Ian thoughtfully, `quite literally from what we've seen - and telepathic powers, like Susan started to develop on the Sense-Sphere. Could it be responsible somehow? Could it be taking us where, subconsciously, we want to go?'

Barbara didn't like where this conversation was leading. 'Are you trying to tell me we can't go home because we don't want it enough?'

`I'm saying it's a possibility. Barbara, you mentioned before about warning yourself not to go into the TARDIS. Would you really do that, do you think, if it was possible?'

She didn't need to think long, but she was surprised by her own answer. `No. No, I don't think I would now. Isn't that strange?'

Ian grinned. `No more strange than some of the things we've seen.'

`Are you ready to come back with me now?' the Doctor asked stiffly. He was staring at his granddaughter in that particularly unnerving way of which only he seemed capable. Susan didn't ask how he had found her.

She cut straight to the heart of her decision. `I want to go back to Salem Village!'

`I know you do, Susan,' he said quietly, with an air of sadness. `I know, child, but you cannot.'

`Why can't I?' She squared up to him, defying him to deny her needs again. Couldn't he see how important this was to her? `What's the point in being able to travel in time if we can't change anything?'

`What has happened is in the past. We must not alter it. We cannot. You know that, child.' He was agitated now, clearly keen to end the discussion. Normally, Susan would have acceded to his wishes, but this had been too long in coming. It was time he stopped treating her like a little girl.

`What do you mean, "the past"? Whose past? Not ours.'

`But somebody's.'

`When we went to Marinus we were in somebody's past, but it didn't stop us fighting the Voord. We changed everything on Skaro. I don't understand, Grandfather, Why can't we just do the same thing again? Win' can't we help?' A sob caught in her throat and she looked away. her resolve fading, the angry words left hanging between them, She wiped hot tears on to her sleeve.

`I'm sorry, Susan. I should never have brought you here. I was simply trying to instruct you in a chapter of Earth's history. I should have considered the effect it might have upon you. Can you forgive a careless old man this one lapse?'

She didn't want to, but her reaction to his love was automatic. Her stubbornness melted and a weak smile forced its way through the tears. She took his proffered hand and allowed him to envelop her in his arms. He guided her back towards the shadowed alcove in which they had left the TARDIS.

But he didn't answer her question.

`We'd have to stay in Bristol,' said Ian, as he and Barbara strolled along the streets, arm in arm, through a light drizzle.

`Or move on. We couldn't go back to London.'

`We'd have to create new identities for ourselves,' said Barbara.

`We couldn't access our bank accounts.'

`We'd have to get new jobs and places to stay, but we'd need false documents to do that.'

`We'd have to wait for nine years.'

`But then we could just step on to a bus, head back to Coal Hill School and resume our old lives.

Ian smiled. 'We'd have to explain how come we've aged a decade overnight.'

Barbara laughed. 'And why we can't remember a thing about our lesson plans, or the work we set yesterday. Or which classes we're supposed to be taking.'

'I've got homework to mark,' said Ian suddenly. 'First-year science, chemical formulae. I left it in the back of my car on Totters Lane.'

'I can't remember where I was up to with my fifth-year class and the French Revolution.'

'Would you tell them what we learned about it?'

'Oh yes, I can just imagine it. "Miss Wright says she went back in time." It'd be the talk of the playground.'

'I doubt that. Most of the kids think we were born three hundred years ago anyway,' joked Ian.

They sighed in unison, lost in nostalgia for a world they might not see again. It was Barbara who put their disappointment into words. 'It's not really practical, is it?'

`So near and yet...'

`I'd like to stay here a while longer. It's familiar.'

`But it's not where we belong.'

`We'll have to trust the Doctor to take us back, eventually.'

`Via several more planets and times, I shouldn't wonder.'

`I'd just like to see an end to it.'

`We can,' said Ian. `We're almost there, It wasn't to be this time, that's all.'

They had thought their wanderings to be aimless, but it came as no surprise to either of them to find the wooden blue police box that was the TARDIS's deceptive exterior at the end of their journey. They halted before it, and both felt a strange sensation that was akin to, but not quite like, coming home.

`So it's once more unto the breach,' said Ian, with a faint smile.
`Once more,' agreed Barbara.

They stepped through the doors and left 1954 behind.

The four travellers sat around a table eating food tablets which, remarkable though their flavours were, made Barbara yearn for the proper texture of home-cooked bacon and eggs. She and Ian should have checked into a hotel for the night, but it had been too late. Instead, they had walked into an argument in progress and were now involved in one of those interminable councils of war in which the Doctor always seemed to take delight in being contrary.

`History is sacrosanct,' he stated for the fourth time, looking as intense and serious as Barbara had ever seen him. `You cannot, you must not, ask me to interfere with it. The very idea is impossible, quite impossible.'

Susan jutted out her lower lip defiantly, and Ian broke in with a diplomatic question. 'It's just that you've never explained the mechanics of time travel to us, Doctor. It would help us all if we could understand.'

'Understand? Explain to you?' The Doctor laughed out loud. Barbara smarted at his condescending attitude. 'My dear boy, would you try to explain the principles of a Bunsen burner to a primate? No, this is far beyond your comprehension, too far beyond. Susan may learn when she is older, but as for the rest of you, the human mind is simply not equipped to deal with four-dimensional physics.'

'So you say,' interrupted Barbara, 'but it seems to me that your answer to everything is "Do what I tell you and ask no questions".'

'And have I steered you wrong? Your greatest problems. Miss Wright, come when you ignore my advice. You do remember the Aztecs, hmm?'

'Of course I do!' It wasn't fair of him to mention that.

'You tried to alter the past then.'

'That's why I understand what Susan is going through.'

'But you could not do it!'

'I didn't succeed then, no.'

Is that what you're trying to tell us, Doctor?' interjected Ian, again trying to calm the situation down. 'That time or destiny or something won't allow us to change things?'

'If you like.'

'Then what harm is there in letting Susan try?' asked Barbara. 'She got to know some of the people of Salem,

Doctor - we all did - and a day later, you tell her how they were horribly killed and she can't do a thing about it. She just wants to understand why not. Are you really so devoid of simple human compassion that you can't see that? That you can't give your own granddaughter some comfort'

The Doctor leapt to his feet, eyes wide with fury, his shoulders quivering. 'I have heard quite enough from you young lady. I will decide what is to be done with my own granddaughter - and if I don't want her gadding about in all sorts of danger, attempting the impossible and being upset when it can't be done, well, that is the end of the matter!'

He turned and stormed out of the room. Barbara, Ian and Susan shuffled uncomfortably in the ensuing silence.

Two hours earlier, Ian had suggested that the Doctor had mellowed. Perhaps it had simply been that his companions had learned how to deal with him, how to steer clear of difficult topics and when to just nod their heads and agree.

Tonight, they had touched upon one of the most difficult of all. But it was difficult for Barbara too, and perhaps she had overreacted to the Doctor's truculence.

Her failure to save the Aztec civilisation from its untimely demise still hurt. She remembered how fiercely she had wanted to alter their fate. She knew that Susan was feeling those same emotions now. But she also knew how painful it had been to have her every plan thwarted, to watch as history marched on despite her best efforts. Might Susan not be spared that? Or might she actually succeed in her aims, despite what her grandfather said? The Doctor's argument had too many flaws; he had refused to answer too many questions. What if they could save those lives after all?

What if?

It all seemed moot now. Without the Doctor, they could not go anywhere; certainly not to Salem. Nobody else could

pilot the Ship. Susan muttered a tearful thank-you to her former teachers for arguing her case, then retired to her bedroom. Barbara hoped she would get over the disappointment. She had not recovered from hers.

'I'm starting to have second thoughts,' she confided in Ian, sadly. 'Nine years doesn't seem too long to wait if we can guarantee getting home at the end of it. I just want this madness to end.'

'I know Barbara,' he said with a disconsolate sigh. 'I know.'

Susan couldn't sleep. Whenever she closed her eyes, she saw Abigail or Mary or Rebecca Nurse; even John Proctor. How could the girls with whom she had laughed and joked be capable of sending even the harshest of masters to an ignoble death as they had? In the back of her mind, she almost accepted the Doctor's insistence that history could not be altered, though she did not understand why. But still she felt an overpowering urge to try something, even if it was just to find Mary and ask her what she was doing, shake some sense into her. Just something. She could at least be there. So it was that Susan rose from her bed and dressed again in her seventeenth-century garb. She padded softly through the corridors of the TARDIS which, in deference to its occupants' body clocks, were scantily illuminated by night lights. The console room was enveloped in shadow Susan felt the same fear, the same thrill of disobedience, that had run through her in the parsonage during Abigail's ceremony. She was doing something very wrong, but something right, too.

The Doctor had not yet tutored her in the Ship's operation. She could not fly it herself. But she did know the function of one particular switch, and it was enough for her purposes. She hesitated over it, imagining her grandfathers' anger when he saw what she had done. It was not enough to stop her. Not this time. She recalled too that dreadful day when he had last pressed this switch; when a serious malfunction had almost killed the entire crew. But he had

repaired it since. Had he not?

In the end, her worries were as nothing compared with her overriding need to return to Salem. Nothing else mattered. And so, with a frightened little stab of her forefinger, Susan operated the fast-return switch. And she closed her eyes and breathed a sigh of relief as the ship's engines wheezed into life and proceeded to carry her from Bristol, from the twentieth century. Towards the seventeenth. In time, perhaps, her grandfather would come to understand why.

PART THREE

DREAMING OF THE DEVIL

29 June 1692

Something was wrong.

Susan hadn't noticed it at first, so caught up had she been in her decision to disobey her grandfather and its likely consequences. The forest in which the TARDIS had landed had been familiar enough, and she had been pleased - no, relieved - to find that the Ship had indeed returned to whence it had come. She had stumbled through the undergrowth, cursing the long period skirts that prudence had suggested she wear; longing to reach the end of an interminable journey. And, at last, the wooden dwellings of Salem Village had indeed come into sight.

But something was wrong. Where was the snow, which had fallen only yesterday? Why did the ceiling of the forest seem so dense and green? Where had the flowers the cowslips and violets - sprung from?

Looking back, it seemed strange she had not realised it before. The village was no longer in winter; the temperature itself should have told her as much. The heat was oppressive, uncomfortable. With the changing of seasons, Salem had only swapped one ordeal for another. And, as for Susan, had she returned too late to make a difference? Her stomach sank at the thought. Or could she be too early? Yes, that was more like it. This could be an earlier summer, a better chance to alter what was to come. Why else would things be so serene? She had not yet caught sight of a single person: this could hardly be a community in turmoil. And the sinister chill that played on her nerves..., well, that was only imagination, fired up by her foreknowledge of what would happen here. She had no reason to worry, she told herself. And wished she could believe it.

What would her grandfather do in this situation? Apply his logic, she decided. He would have said there was no point in worrying about what she did not know and could not control. She had to be more like him. More rational, more decisive. Her first step had to be to learn the date, then she could make definite plans.

Susan gritted her teeth, clenched her fists in determination, and headed towards the village centre. But, within a minute, she was running again, spurred on by the illogical certainty that this was indeed 1692 and she was too late to do a thing.

Three months of shame. Three months of privation and despair, shuffled from one stinking prison to the next.

Three months of unanswered appeals to God's mercy and doubts about her own worthiness to receive it. In the end, it all came down to this. Thomas Fisk, the jury's foreman, stood. Rebecca Nurse could feel her legs trembling as she awaited her church's verdict upon her. Her weak chest ached and she wanted to cough. She resisted the urge. Her eyes closed, unable to make her face the man who held her fate in his hands. Shackles chafed at her wrists and she stood in silence. Oddly, she thought not of her own death, should the worst come to pass, but rather of her disgrace.

She could not live if her peers could judge her evil. It came down to one sentence a single pronouncement to seal the difference between continuing life and ignoble execution.

May it please the court. we find the defendant not guilty
Rebecca could scarcely believe her failing ears. But there had been no mistake. Above the clamour of the audience - all reactions from joy to outraged disbelief - she could hear enough of the exchange between Fisk and Chief-Justice Stoughton to know she was saved. She was the first suspect acquitted by this court. Her Lord had not found her wanting. With this realisation. her legs gave way at last. It

didn't matter. She wanted to kneel anyway, to give thanks and praise.

She was swept to her feet by strong arms, which folded themselves about her in the first embrace she had been allowed in too long a time. She laid her head against Francis's chest and sobbed tears of relief into his jerkin. She could not speak, could barely even stand. Her strength, no longer needed, had fled from her bones. The world shot out of focus, sounds merging into a cacophony, and there was only Rebecca and her beloved husband, finally reunited.

The moment didn't last. He was torn away and she was surrounded by constables again. They took her elbows and returned her to the bar. She tried to protest, but had no voice. How could they treat her thus? Had they not heard?

She was innocent. But the atmosphere in the meetinghouse had changed markedly. The revellers had been silenced; even those who had protested the verdict were struck dumb. And Rebecca shared their horror as she saw, in a mortifying time-stopping second, what had become of her accusers.

They were screaming. They writhed on the bare planks and thrashed out a space for themselves amid the throng. Nobody dared approach lest the curse be passed to them too. For surely these girls were cursed, and by beings most foul. Their limbs flailed. Their bodies spasmed and contorted into positions such as could not be natural. Their fits were far more vicious than any Rebecca had seen before. She was fair moved to tears by their agonies, her heart wounded more so by the tender age of those afflicted. Only Mrs Putnam was of sufficient years to have earned such torments, and surely God could have pardoned even her many trespasses?

So upset was Rebecca that seconds passed before she realised the import of what she was witnessing. Only when she saw that as many eyes were upon her as upon the girls

did she appreciate what was being thought of her. It took Ann's husband, Thomas, to put suspicions into words. A thick-set, swarthy, moustached man, in fine clothes that did not hang well from his labourers body, he elbowed a path to his wife's side. He cradled her and reached out a helpless hand to his equally stricken daughter. In anguish, he yelled to the jury, 'Are you blind that you cannot see how Rebecca Nurse hurts these people? The evil cow delights in your perverse decision. You would free her to spread her malice across a world!'

'Your wife is a liar and a fraud,' contested Francis hotly, 'and she has ensorcelled your daughter in her wicked plans. Bid them stop this play-acting!' But his accusation was met by renewed screams and wails. It was clear to all present that the suffering of Ann Putnam Senior. and of the girls, was only too real

She laughs at us. claimed Ann She says she will not leave us be so long as she lives. She has escaped judgment and knows now that no mortal power will act against her Tell her to stop. 'Father' begged the younger Ann stop Goody Nurse from hurting us.

You do the Devils work here. 'Fisk' Thomas Putnam cried at the jury's foreman. 'Their agonies are on your conscience'

It was all too much for Rebecca. Feeling faint, she clapped a hand to her feverish brow. To her alarm. Abigail Williams mimicked the action, clutching at her own forehead in agony. And she was followed by Mary Warren. and by several more of the girls. Rebecca was seized again. Despite the protests of family and friends, the constables dragged her from the room. Belatedly, she heard the bellowed orders of Stoughton, cutting across the pandemonium: 'I will not have these witnesses so harmed. Remove the witch from my court!'

'You cannot do this,' protested Francis. 'She has been cleared of the charges!' For his troubles, he was brutally

pushed aside.

As when she had been arrested, and at all times since, Rebecca offered no resistance. She went along with her captors, displaying as much dignity as her sorely punished frame could muster. Despite this turn of events, she trusted in God to look after her. She had to keep her faith. For what else had she?

Abigail was on her knees, her every muscle throbbing. She heaved air into her wheezing chest and shook and whimpered and prayed for the unendurable pain to end, for her mortal body would surely break if it did not. As the hail of blows and kicks receded at last, she lifted her aching head in hope and felt a rush of cold sweat in her face. But the blood of the Devil choked her as she beheld the spirit of Rebecca Nurse, hovering insubstantially above the beams in the roof, grey face twisted in malice. Fear pierced Abigail's heart like a dagger; fear that this woman would be allowed to go free to torture her hated enemies anew. Fear that her acquittal would cast doubt upon the past and future testimonies of all who had been harmed, allowing more witches to escape God's wrath. She would rather die than live in such an unremitting Hell.

But God was on Abigail's side today, despite her past sins. The spirit let out a dreadful wailing and was dragged to the meetinghouse door, expelled by the goodness of a morally outraged community. It followed its shell of flesh, as this too was hustled from the building. The pain dissipated and Abigail rocked back into a sitting position on the sawdust, panting in relief. The other girls subsided too, and the elder Ann Putnam wept quietly into her husband's shoulder. The insistent banging of Stoughton's gavel brought a heavy silence to the court at last.

The Chief-Justice was silent himself for a full minute, and Abigail watched his ponderous expression intently and impatiently. He had consulted with Hathorne and the other judges, of course, but the decision on how to proceed was

his. With the full force of an eleven-year-old's determination, she willed him to overturn the verdict. She could think of nothing in her life that had ever been more important than that Rebecca Nurse be hanged. She let out a short, well-timed sob, and it served to galvanise Stoughton into action. 'I will not impose on the jury,' he said in slow, measured tones 'but I must ask if you considered one statement made by the prisoner. When Deliverance Hobbs was brought in to testify, Rebecca Nurse turned her head to her and said. You bring one of us into the court?' Has the jury weighed the implications of this statement?'

His message was clear. The bench would not be satisfied until the prisoner's guilt was agreed. A murmur of discontent rippled through some quarters of the crowd, but with the chaos of the last few minutes abated, they were too aware of their surroundings to speak out of turn. They held their objections and hoped for good tidings instead. The jury retired again, obediently, and Abigail used her hand to conceal a tiny smile. Yes, God was indeed on her side today.

Parris should have been writing a sermon. He should have been crafting words with which to bolster the spirit of his flock, so frayed by recent events. But he could not concentrate. Not too far distant - in his own meetinghouse, no less - Governor Phips's Special Court of Oyer and Terminer was sitting in judgment. He had no doubt of its verdicts upon those accused Justice would be done, but the battered and bleeding heart may well be torn out of his church in the process. And worse, so many more witches still practised undetected. Salem Village was facing its final test. It was by no means certain that it would pass. So' how could he write in such circumstances?

He was secretly pleased, then, by the distraction afforded by a fist upon his door. But pleasure gave way to irritation as the hammering continued unabated, a sign of somebody's impatience. Parris bristled at their nerve and drew breath to remonstrate with them most strongly as he

strode through the hallway and yanked open the door. But the air was caught in his lungs and his throat constricted by surprise, if not alarm, as he saw who awaited him on the threshold. `What have you done?' Susan Chesterton demanded, eyes brimming, jaw thrust forward in determination but quivering. He was taken aback. `Have you been taught that this be the correct way to address a minister of the cloth?' he spluttered.

`If you were really a holy man, you'd stop what is happening.'

`It is not for one of your years to judge.'

`But people will die!'

`Those of your kind, maybe. Witches, who deserve not to walk upon God's clean earth!'

Her eyes widened; she actually looked appalled. `I'm not a witch, and neither are those people you're condemning to death. Just look at what you're doing, you stupid, primitive, bigoted...' She punctuated her words with sobs, until she could speak no more. Scandalised though he was by her insolence, the minister could not help but feel sorry for Susan as she turned away, crying into her sleeve. Her slight form had deflated, the fight drained from her. He reminded himself that any child was but the product of its guardians' wisdom, and that this one must have been subjected to all manner of vile preachings. Still, though she refused to see the witches for what they were, she held a commendable regard for life. She might be saved, if only she could be made to acknowledge her sins and repent of them.

Parris stepped out into the still, mid-afternoon air and laid a hand on Susan's trembling shoulder. `You have been gone from Salem some time, child. You may not be aware of what has transpired.' He was more accustomed to scorn than to compassion; his gentle words sounded awkward in his ears. He changed register so that he was lecturing, as if from the pulpit. He would stir the goodness in her soul. 'I know

witches walk abroad: the Devil planted his seeds in my own home. To this day, I regret most bitterly that I did not see his cruel jest, but he was ever the master of deception.'

Susan said nothing and didn't face him. But her tears had ceased now and she was listening at least. Her attention spurred him through the most difficult, most shameful, part of his narrative.

'My own slave, Tituba, brought the ways of her heathen land to our society. She indoctrinated my daughter and niece with black, twisted scriptures, and bade them go into the forest and perform dark rituals. It was only through God's grace that I discovered them in time to save them. I sent Betty away and, thank the Lord, she appears well. But Abigail and many other girls have been molested by demons ever since. The witches thought to have the precious souls of children in their grasps. They are embittered and vengeful at their failure. Now, with a door to the Devil opened and the Day of Judgment nigh, they are emboldened to come amongst us, to torture those who have defied them. I know not for how much longer our children might endure.'

He was aware of his own voice rising passionately, as quotations from his unfinished sermon slipped into his speech. But, by God, she would hear the truth from him and she would believe.

'How can you be so sure?' she asked, almost voicelessly.

'How can you know who is a witch and who isn't?'

'They are revealed by their actions,' said Parris without hesitation, surprised that she should even ask. 'You witnessed the torments of my daughter and niece, I am told, when first they struck. You may even have been afflicted yourself.' Susan didn't answer. She seemed less certain of her ground by the second.

He continued: 'The girls, God help them, still have the strength and goodness to cry out upon their attackers, to resist the attempts to still their tongues. If this were not enough, many witches are moved to confess their sins in hope of forgiveness. They speak of others amongst the accused and put the lie to their claims of innocence. Tituba herself told how she was made to sign the Devil's book and how, even then, hers was but one of ten marks in its pages.'

'And this Tituba... is she... did you execute her?'

'Why, no. The sinner confessed to her crimes and has since made an attempt to atone. It is yet too soon to know if a spell in jail might be sufficient to absolve her, or if the noose will be required. But such matters need not concern you, Susan.'

She looked at him now, and a new hope shone in her watery eyes. 'Then it's not too late? You haven't killed them yet'

'We have dispatched only the most hardened, the most unrepentant witch of all,' said Parris proudly, for she will serve as an example to her kin. But that example has not been heeded by some. The court sits again in the meeting-house this day, and word reaches me that several more will join Bridget Bishop in Purgatory.

'Bridget?' if Paris was surprised by Susan's horrified reaction, he was positively aghast as she swiped his hand away and rounded on him furiously 'No! How could you?'

She was kind to me - she helped me when I was lost - and you've murdered her!' This last was screamed hoarsely.

Susan pummelled her fists against his chest ineffectively and he stumbled back against the parsonage wall. 'What's wrong with you? Is this what your God would want you to do? Hate people, persecute them, kill them for being different?' And then her accusations dissolved into a fresh deluge of tears.

Parris had been caught off guard by the outburst, but he composed himself now and felt rage mounting in place of surprise. How could she be so ungrateful for his guidance?

`That is enough!' he bellowed, seizing her arms and pushing her away.

She tore free from his grip and backed off, face crumpled by misery, voice catching. `There are no witches, you stupid little man. There's no such thing as witches!'

Then she turned and ran.

Susan didn't get far. She just wanted to put some distance between herself and the insanity, to be left alone, to think. So she hared off the beaten path and came to rest by the deserted field in which the militia sometimes trained. There, she stopped and gulped in air in short, frenzied bursts. She tried to stem her tears, but the news of Bridget's untimely demise pricked her eyes and teased out more.

She couldn't do this without help. She had seen the Doctor walk into many a desperate situation armed only with diplomacy and wit, but she was not as articulate as he. Her carefully prepared, reasoned arguments had become so much defiant bluster in the heat of her confrontation with Parris. He had been too logical, too sure of himself, and she was only now beginning to appreciate that she was arguing against not merely a misconception but an entire culture. She had probably made things worse, not better. She wished Ian and Barbara could be here, but they were most likely asleep in the TARDIS, unaware it had even landed.

She was alone.

She thought about giving up then, but a flame still burnt in her chest, fed more now by resentment than by purpose. Resentment at the way the minister had treated her; at the TARDIS, for bringing her here too late; at Bridget Bishop, even, for being dead. Resentment at all the myriad cruel

twists of fate that had combined, in an almost calculated manner, to foil her plans. To ensure that The Crucible's events came to pass. It was almost certain now.

But not if she could help it.

Something of what Parris had said filtered back into her conscious mind. Almost before she knew it, she was moving again at a trot, a new sense of urgency Propelling her. She stooped low to pass the open Windows of the parsonage and hurried on to the crossroads, beyond which stood the meetinghouse As she approached it, she could see a cart pulling away, and villagers were beginning to spill out of the building She heard their voices, some raised in anger, some in excitement. Some people were weeping. She joined the throng, without thinking how they might react to her appearance Fortunately, they seemed Oblivious to it. their gossiping, judgmental tongues bent only to the outcome of the recently concluded trial. There was no mistaking what the verdict must have been. What Susan needed to know was, which hapless innocent had they condemned?

She spotted a familiar face and pushed her way through the rank, unwashed crowd towards its owner. `Mary,' she called, straining to make herself heard. `Mary!'

The young woman reacted to her third shout, a broad smile banishing her doleful expression. `Susan, you're back!'

They fought to reach each other and finally embraced, But Mary broke away, uncertain. `Oh, but I should not be seen with you. Thanks to Goodman Proctor, the whole village knows of your family's ideas.'

Only now did Susan see how Mary Warren had changed. She looked dreadful. Though only a few months could have passed since last they had met, she seemed to have aged many years. Her face was lined and haggard, more befitting a woman of forty than a girl of half that age. Her skin was pale, her lovely brown hair filthy and bedraggled. For Mary,

such neglect was unusual indeed. Her eyes were sunken, red-rimmed and haunted. She had become little more than a sad ghost of her past self. 'What's happened to you?' asked Susan, concerned.

'Why do you return now? You can only get yourself, and me, into the most terrible of trouble. You should leave while you still can.'

'I can't do that,' she insisted. 'You people need my help.'

'We need but the favour of our Lord - for it seems he must have abandoned this unfaithful flock to the waiting forces of evil.'

Susan's misery deepened at this proclamation. She swallowed and tried not to cry again. How could she alter such deeply ingrained beliefs? How could she save this colony from itself? Mary bowed her head and tried to slip away, but Susan chased her and halted her. 'Who was it?' she asked breathlessly. 'Who was on trial in there?'

'The most recent of them was Goody Nurse.'

'Already?' she cried in horror. 'What happened?'

'They found her to be a witch and sentenced her to hang.' Mary's matter-of-fact tone heightened Susan's revulsion, though the words confirmed nothing she did not know.

'No!'

'The jury thought her innocent at first, but so clear was her guilt that they were made to reconsider. It is naught to grieve over, Susan. The witch bedeviled me, and I said as much in court.'

How much worse could it get? 'You testified against her?'

'It is for us all to root out the witches in our midst.'

Rebecca Nurse deserves what fate has been chosen for her.'

'How can you say that?'

'All Salem knows it! On the day she was arrested, the Lord sent rain to break the drought. He was pleased with our work.'

'You can't mean this!

But Mary pulled away then. 'I will talk to you no longer. Susan, if you cannot recognise what is so plainly just.'

This time, Susan allowed her to escape. It could do no good to reason with the likes of Mary Warren, anyhow. She should talk to those who held influence, if Parris wouldn't help her, then somebody else might. Rebecca Nurse's judges, perhaps?

'I must get in there,' she insisted as two men, garbed in the long red cloaks, leather belts and high boots of the village guard, moved to bar her way into the meetinghouse. 'You don't understand, it's a matter of life and death. They've got everything wrong!'

'Go home to your parents, child,' ordered one of the guards. 'It is not for you to question the court's decision.'

'No, you've got to let me through!' She made a rush between them, but was caught and flung back into the crowd. She swayed, clutching hold of somebody's tunic for support, was shrugged off and found herself in the dirt, almost trampled by unheeding feet. She couldn't stop the tears, then, and she pounded her fists into the ground impotently. Why couldn't she make them listen?

By now, Susan had been spotted. She was lifted to her feet and surrounded by curious onlookers, eager for more spectacle now that the trial had ended.

'Are you afflicted?' somebody asked her.

`Are you beset by witches, dear girl? Does someone torment you?'

`Is it Goodwife Nurse? Can you see her spirit?'

Somebody, somewhere, was laughing. Laughing, after all they had done today.

She felt her cheeks blushing hot crimson. Her vision clouded. `Get away from me!' she screamed, focusing all her hate and anger into that single command. She elbowed her way through the startled crowd, deaf to the squeals of indignation and surprise and the pious words of condemnation, until she was clear of the clinging primitives and could run again. Run far and fast, blotting out the pain and the aching frustration for those few minutes of urgent, all-consuming effort, knowing only that she had to be far from here.

But she could not outrun her emotions. It occurred to her that she had wasted most of this day in trying.

Several hours passed before the Doctor found her. The fading sun still washed the western horizon in shades of blood. It would soon be gone. The air hung heavy, but the day's heat was beginning to dissipate. She was standing alone, at the top of a hill to the south and west of Salem Town. A silent sentinel. She stared, empty-eyed, out towards the ocean. It was some distance away, but in those moments when a light breeze deigned to blow westward, they could hear its mighty waves tumbling. Crashing in their endless, unstoppable cycle. A reminder that time marched on.

`Susan?' His call was a tentative one; a feeler sent out to test her mood. `Susan, child.'

She didn't respond. He sighed and crossed the distance between them, a supportive presence by her side. He ought to have berated her for acting irresponsibly for placing herself in danger. But he knew what urge had brought her

to this place. Perhaps he should have been more sympathetic towards it. Much as it pained him, she would have to learn this lesson the hard way. As had Barbara before her. As had he.

Its funny, isn't it?' she said at length. Her voice was hollow and dispirited. 'Ian and Barbara will be born over there, but not for another two and a half centuries.' She nodded towards the ocean, across which - beyond the range of sight - lay the island of Great Britain. 'I'm trying to save their race, or a part of it, and it's all so real and immediate to me. But, by their time, it will mean nothing. All this will mean nothing.'

'Time passes. Look at yourself: you're no longer just my grandchild, Susan. You're growing into a fine young woman. He said it with a good measure of pride, but also a tinge of regret. She had accepted his every word once, so eager to please him. Times had changed. She was maturing, faster than an old man would like. She would leave him soon.

'You knew it was going to end like this, didn't you?' He didn't answer. She didn't need him to. 'I'm not going to give up, you know. Not while there's still hope.'

'Susan, child...' The Doctor reached out to her, but she pulled away. Her tear-swollen eyes were smouldering. 'Bridget Bishop is dead! And Rebecca Nurse, one of the nicest, most harmless, most generous people I've met, is going to be next. Whether you help me or not, I'm going to stop it. I've got to try!'

She faltered, her breathing fast and shallow as she wrestled her emotions back under control. Again, the Doctor did nothing but watch her sadly. He had hoped to fetch her back to the TARDIS, where Ian and Barbara were waiting. He could see now that this would be impossible.

When next she spoke, she had calmed down considerably, but there was an edge to her voice. 'Do you know where we

are, Grandfather?'

Of course he did. How else had he guessed where she might be. so far from the village?

Were on Gallows Hill,' she said. 'This is where they bring people to die. This is where they'll have killed Bridget and where they're going to kill Rebecca - and John Proctor and all the others.'

The Doctor's gaze was inexorably drawn to a tall, strong oak tree on the brow of the hill. Despite himself, he felt a macabre tingle in his old bones. They had hanged Bridget Bishop from the branches of that tree, a mere nineteen days ago. They had tied a rope about her neck, let her drop, and watched her agonies as she was suffocated to death.

'This is where they're going to kill them,' repeated Susan, and her voice quavered as tears welled up once more. She turned away from him, as if she didn't want him to see her cry. This time, he took her silence as an opportunity to speak.

He couched his words in a restrained and infinitely patient tone. 'The Crucible didn't tell you everything, Susan. There was much more to the Salem witch-hunt than mere squabbles and superstitions. Much more. It wasn't a product of just one or two mishaps: it was the culmination of years of oppression and fear and hatred; the result of a hundred minor grudges and a thousand age-old prejudices. It had to happen, Susan - and believe me, child, there's no way you or I could have stopped it even if the laws of time allowed such interference.'

'The laws of time?' she repeated disdainfully.

'You'll understand one day, Susan. We can't always be actors in the play. Sometimes, it is given to us merely to be the audience.'

She didn't answer that, but nor did she surrender her position. She was stubborn; almost as stubborn as he. 'I learned something the first time we came here,' she said quietly, at last. 'I learned where Salem got its name.'

'From the Hebrew word, shalom,' he said with an understanding nod.

'It means "peace". I thought that was quite nice at the time.'

The Doctor enveloped his granddaughter gently in the folds of his cloak, and they stared out towards the ocean together.

30 June 1692

Susan couldn't move. She was pinned to her bed, arms wrapped around her pillow, face stuck to it by sweat, aware of her surroundings but paralysed. She could do nothing but whimper as the room shifted about her. Wooden walls creaked and stretched out of shape, rearing up like animated gargoyles. She tried to scream for her grandfather, but the Doctor was already there. He stood amid the distorting timbers and directed them to menace her: punishment for her disobedience. And she could see familiar faces in the grain and knot holes of the wood. Her friends, old and new. Mary, Abigail, Ann, Betty. Ian and Barbara. Her classmates from Coal Hill School and before.

They twisted in pain and begged her for release. For it was clear to Susan that their suffering was indeed her fault. She should not have attended the ritual at the parsonage. Should not have argued with John Proctor. Should not have returned to this place. She was an evil, wilful child. She regained control of her muscles and threw herself upright, gasping with the effort. The room snapped back to normal and Susan shivered in the early-morning light that filtered through the dark glass and painted the room in shades of brown. It dismayed her to see that the Doctor was not present. He had abandoned his vigil. She tried to tell herself she did not need him. It had been nothing more than a nightmare and she was not a baby any more. But never had she suffered a dream so vivid, so terrifying. Her stomach was unsettled and her head was starting to ache.

The Doctor sighed as he inspected the image on the TARDIS's scanner screen. Light had penetrated even the canopy of the forest. 'I must leave,' he said, 'before it is too late in the day for me to reach civilisation unseen.'

'I still think we should come with you, Doctor.'

'No, Chesterton.' He spoke sternly, allowing a trace of anger into his voice. He was the captain and the owner of

this ship why couldn't they accept his orders without question for once? He had only returned at all, briefly, to ensure that they did nothing foolhardy in his absence.

'We've been through this before - and at great length. I might add. I simply wish to talk some sense into my grandchild and bring her back home before anything else happens.'

What if Susan won't come with you again?' asked Barbara.

'Then you won't assist me by jeopardising your own safety, will you? Hmm? No, so long as the two of you are in Salem Village, you will only draw the more attention to all of us. Susan is bright enough, she will see sense soon. We'll be back here by, oh, by late afternoon I should think.'

He made a good job of sounding confident. If only they had seen the girl last night, they would have known it to be a façade. Susan had refused to accompany the Doctor to the TARDIS, suspecting that he might take off while she slept. Reluctantly, he had checked them both into a room at Ingersoll's, using the name John Smith again. He didn't intend to spend a second night there.

He reached for the door control but, to his annoyance, Barbara moved to block him. 'There's time yet,' she said firmly. 'It's only just dawn. I want to discuss this business about changing history.'

'Discuss what, precisely?' he returned petulantly. 'I have made my position quite clear. Quite clear.'

She was undeterred. 'I just want you to be honest with us. Is it possible, in any way, that Susan could alter the past?'

He glared at her with hooded eyes, his lips pursed angrily.

'I thought you, of all people, would understand. I only wish to save the child from going through exactly what you did.'

Barbara opened her mouth again, but he swept towards the doors, hands clasped behind his back. 'Now, I would like to leave this forest in one piece, if you have no objections - and I will have a better chance of so doing if you will allow me to leave now.'

He pivoted to face his companions, in time to catch the uncomfortable glance that flew between them. His smile became broader but remained tight-lipped as he gestured towards the door control on the console.

'If you would be so kind?'

An insistent shaking roused Barbara from a gentle doze. She was both perplexed and concerned to find Ian standing over her, his expression taut with worry. 'What is it?' she asked, sitting up in a feeble impression of readiness and rubbing sleep from her eyes. 'Has something happened?'

'Nothing,' he said. 'That's the problem, Barbara. Nothing has happened. The Doctor's been gone for over three hours now and we haven't heard a dicky bird.'

She sighed. Ian's typically protective attitude could be endearing, but it made him difficult to live with when he was feeling helpless. She had gone to bed, after a long and fraught night, partly to escape his pacing the console room like a caged beast, his itching to operate the door control, Why couldn't he have let her sleep?

'I don't think he's planning to just grab Susan by the scruff of her neck and drag her back here,' Barbara pointed out a little shortly. 'They'll need time to talk.'

'I suppose so,' said Ian, somewhat reluctantly, 'but I think we should go after them all the same. They could be in danger.'

'No. You heard what the Doctor said.'

'Oh? And since when did he have our best interests at heart?'

*That's not fair, Ian, He was making sense. They're in the middle of a witch-hunt out there, and half those villagers are already convinced that we qualify.'

`And what about Susan?'

`They never hanged children.'

`But they won't exactly make her life pleasant, will they?'

She had to concede the point. `I'm just worried, Barbara, The Doctor might be clever, but he does tend to overestimate his own abilities. What if he runs into trouble? I don't want to be just sitting here while they get tortured or thrown into prison or worse.'

Barbara relaxed and sank back into her pillows, her irritation partly replaced by sympathy with his fears, `Why don't we give the Doctor a chance to do things his way? We can't really leave the forest till nightfall, anyway. If he's not back by then, we'll investigate.'

`By nightfall?'

`He did say late afternoon. We should give him some leeway'

`I suppose you're right,' said Ian, although his expression belied his words.

`Now why don't you try getting some sleep?'

He shook his head. `I'll go back to the console room and wait there. I might be able to see them coming on the scanner, now that it's working again.'

He left with a purposeful stride, and Barbara gratefully closed her eyes and tried to clear her mind. Instead, she was beset by images of the Doctor and Susan crying out for help, and of a perilous night-time rescue mission. Even as

they began to blur, finally, into the darkness of sleep, she was disturbed once more.

No sign of them,' reported Ian.

It was going to be a long day.

Susan stumbled out of the meetinghouse, staying upright only through the Doctor's assistance. She breathed deeply of the outside air, but it was hot and heavy and offered scant refreshment. Tiny flies danced around her head and her temples throbbed. 'How do they stand it in there?' she gasped. 'I thought I was going to suffocate.'

You must remember, Susan: for these people, a good trial is the closest thing they have to entertainment. They don't want to miss out, however uncomfortable it might be for them.' 'Entertainment? How can they be entertained by - by what was going on in there?' She swallowed drily and closed her eyes to block out the memory. But she only succeeded in concentrating her mind upon it.

The defendant this morning had been one Sarah Good, clearly an unpopular woman. The villagers had scoffed and roared at her every claim of innocence and had gasped, scandalised, when she had turned their hatred back upon them with insults and curses. Surely this, they had said hypocritically, was proof of guilt.

But more awful still had been the spectacle of the afflicted girls. Susan had recognised Abigail Williams, Ann Putnam Junior and some of the others. She had vacillated between revulsion at their antics and sympathy as she had begun to suspect that they were genuinely tormented.

Their fits were a dozen times more violent than those they had suffered at the parsonage. They were painful at best. unnatural at worst. They had stirred an echo of Susan's own seizure in her chest and left a sick taste in her throat. Dizzy and breathless, she had been forced to leave before a verdict

was reached. She knew what it would be.

Are you ready to go yet?' the Doctor asked. The heat was affecting even him; he had produced a white handkerchief with which he dabbed at his brow. Susan shook her head. He sighed, his disappointment evident. 'It is a sad page of history, Susan, but it has been written.'

How can they do it?' she asked. 'How can they condemn that poor woman when they have no evidence - just stupid stories about her muttering things and making cows sick? Why can't they see how.., how irrational it all is?'

'Fear is the enemy of a rational mind, Susan. That is why you cannot change what will happen here with mere words.'

'But I want to understand it!'

'I know, child. I know.'

'Did you see when Ann Putnam pulled that blade from her stomach and said Sarah Good had put it there? Even when that farmer showed them the rest of the knife - when he said he'd lost its end a few days ago - the judges just told Ann not to lie again. They still accepted everything else she said, without question.'

'The villagers can't stand to see their children in pain,' said the Doctor, 'and their fits are very convincing. Yes, very convincing indeed.'

Susan looked up at him, a little too eagerly. She longed to hear his logical, scientific explanation for the fits, but she could not put her need into words. It was as if something had stopped her tongue. He didn't see her expression. He had turned his head upward, lost in thought. 'And in the seventeenth century,' he muttered, almost to himself, mankind lacked the medical knowledge to deal with such an outbreak of hysteria. It is all most unfortunate.'

She waited for more, but the Doctor shook himself out of his reverie, brandished his cane and changed the subject. Well if you must stay here. my child, we had best inform Lieutenant Ingersoll, hadn't we?' She nodded, almost grateful to him for ending the uncertainty and tension of the moment. She did want to find out more, but she had been unaccountably afraid of what she might hear. They headed for Ingersoll's tavern, and Susan wished her headache would fade enough to allow her to think clearly.

Even the sight of Francis could not restore Rebecca Nurse's spirit. One of the jailers unshackled her legs from the damp stone wall and propelled her towards him with a shove. She stumbled across the fetid, supine bodies of exhausted cellmates and almost collapsed herself before she reached the barred window and let the steel support her weight. Her husband reached through and took her hands, but didn't know what to say. Poor Francis; he had been so confused and lost since the day Israel Porter had informed her that the girls did cry out against her. He had tried to be strong in the subsequent harrowing times, but she had ever been the strong one.

Francis's grimy face and the wild abandon of his tangled black hair spoke of his neglect of himself since the trial. His facial muscles had given up, allowing skin to sag from strong cheekbones. His eyes had receded into protective pits of misery and he looked every one of his seventy-plus years. She could only imagine how the farm must be faring. ~How are you feeling?' he asked at last. It was a stupid question, and he seemed to know it.

They treat me no worse than usual,' she said. `It is almost a relief to see an end to it.'

The ghost of an unspeakable horror played with his expression. `You cannot think thus. Many of us know your trial to have been unfair. We plan to challenge its outcome with the ministry.'

Dear Francis, it is too late for protestations. The Lord has passed his judgment upon me.'

`No.'

`Until now, Francis, I could bear the shame, and the pain of my imprisonment. I could bear it so long as I believed in my innocence; so long as I could scorn these evil things that are said of me. Now there is no hope - and, for my hubris and for whatever other grief I have caused my creator, I am to be punished. I can but accept my release from this world and hope he may see fit to grant this unworthy soul forgiveness in the next life.'

Francis leaned his head against the bars and almost cried. She felt for him: to see her surrendering like this must have torn at his heart. But when he spoke again, it was as if he had chosen to forget all she had said, though his dulled tone and deadened eyes betrayed the fresh scars of it.'! must ask you something, Rebecca. When Deliverance Hobbs was brought into the court, you said she was "one of us". What did you mean by it?'

She frowned and glanced back over her shoulder at the wretched woman in question. She appeared to be sleeping.

`Why, merely that she is a prisoner like myself.'

`You do know Stoughton took this to be an admission of guilt? He claimed you referred to her as a fellow witch.' Why. I never meant such a thing.'

Then why did you not tell the court as much? Why did you not answer Goodman Fisk when he put the same question to you?'

She cast her mind back to the closing stages of the trial, after she had been returned to the courtroom. The shouting, screaming, hectoring, the commands of the judiciary, merging into one crashing wave of noise as she

stood with head bowed, awaiting the second verdict. Her ears and mind had been numbed. She could remember no question. `You know I am hard of hearing, and so very weary. In truth, if I had heard myself addressed, I would have responded.'

A flicker of her husband's old self returned, his face lifted by a hardly dared excitement. `Rebecca, my love, you must put this statement into writing, for we can surely prove that a great wrong has been done by you.'

`You have had your time.' The jailer interposed himself between the couple, tore their hands apart and manhandled Rebecca back to her corner. She went without a fight, her gaze lingering on Francis.

`I will return as soon as I may Be strong!

She wondered if he was right. The decision to condemn her had hung by a thread, and that had seemingly been cut by no more than a mistake. Surely, then, that mistake could be corrected once the truth was known. But Rebecca had had too many false causes for hope to believe that God had not set himself against her in this matter. How many more disappointments could he make her to suffer?

The slamming of the cell door and the jangling of keys reverberated in Rebecca's ears long after Francis had been taken away. She wept for him and, uncommonly, for herself. Hearing this familiar sound, the witch Deliverance Hobbs raised a weary but interested head.

Why do you not confess? They believe you to be guilt anyway.'

`I am not guilty.'

Deliverance shrugged halfheartedly. It matters naught
`You have confessed to them, yet they treat you no better than me.'

`But they do not hang me. They will not hang you either

if you tell them what they wish to hear.'

'You would ask me to belie myself?'

'There are worse sins.'

'Indeed there be. I might perform for them; barter for my own neck by testifying to the ill deeds of others, who I know to be innocent of such crimes.' She felt resentment building, but denied herself the emotion. Deliverance Hobbs was as much a victim as she, sapped and dazed by the cruel interrogations of their captors. It was for a higher authority than Rebecca Nurse to judge her. 'No, even though my life be forfeit, though God may have turned against me, I cannot so turn against him.'

'Then may he have mercy upon you.'

The Doctor leaned upon his walking cane feeling the Weight of his body's great age. It was a warm afternoon, but The heat seemed only oppressive, the atmosphere determined to close him in. Rebecca Nurse's home had not changed in its physical detail, but it felt different to him. The eyes of its windows were closed against the pain and the spite that had been hurled in its direction. Smoke no longer curled from its chimney, as if the life within had been extinguished. He didnt know why he was here, except that some echo of Susan's upset had instilled within him an irrational urge to cure this family's ills. He couldn't, of course. Their fate had been made immutable by dried ink on the pages of future texts. He wished he had never read them, then at least he might be able to try.

From this vantage point, he could see the lonely figure of Francis Nurse, approaching the farmhouse on horseback. His gloom seemed to have communicated itself to his animal, which trudged morosely up the gentle path. The news from Salem Prison had not been good. How could it have been? The Doctor had thought to intercept Francis, to offer condolences and encouragement, but he could not

bring himself to do so. However this poor man struggled, it would be in vain, the bonds of cause and effect wound too tight about his life. So how could the Doctor be so hypocritical as to offer hope where none existed? Briefly, he wondered if history could possibly accommodate Rebecca Nurse's salvation. It was unlikely Her death was too important; it influenced, and was remembered by, too many people. A vital link in the chain - and he, for all his disdain of constricting rules, could not break such a link. It was the price he paid for his freedom. Instead, he slipped away from that place. vowing see Rebecca or Francis again. For he knew that, if he did, the temptation to help them might just prove too great for an inveterate meddler to deny.

Susan's head felt worse than ever. When she closed her eyes, shadows of pain danced on the insides of their lids. She tried to focus through it, to concentrate on what Mar was saying, but the argument turned in the same old circles Mary believed in magic, Susan did not. Perhaps she shouldn't have come, but she had wanted to make one person understand her, even if it could not be a minister or a judge. She had waited outside the farmhouse for an hour to be sure that John Proctor was not present. Her relief at finding him absent was balanced by her despair upon learning that he languished in prison, his wife beside him. More pain, more misery. History unfolded too quickly and slipped through her fingers like sand.

Why weren't you in court today?' she challenged.

'I was busy,' said Mary, without meeting her eye.

`You've been thinking about what I said, haven't you?'

`No. It is useless to go against Abigail and the minister and the courts. I of all people should know. It is as I said, I was busy. I look after the Proctors' children and their home.'

`What do you mean, you "of all people"?'`

life into its depths and drowned them.

`What's happened to you, Mary? What turned you into this?'

`I can show you proof,' said Mary woodenly. `I can show you that Elizabeth Proctor, at least, is what they think her to be.'

Susan didn't know if she wanted to see, but her host was already at the head of the staircase. She beckoned her visitor into the main upstairs room, explaining: This is where the Proctors slept.'

What happened in here?' asked Susan. The room was a mess. Furniture had been overturned, clothes strewn about and sheets crumpled on the bed. A barrel that must once have contained ale lay on its side. Its contents had seeped into the floorboards, leaving an amorphous stain. Shelves had been emptied, a work basket broken.

`The sheriff's men seized what things of value they had: said Mary, as if it meant nothing. `I have tidied the rest of the house since, but have had no use for this room.'

`But they haven't even been tried.'

`It is the law. Their goods belong to the Crown now.'

`And what are their children supposed to live on?' The cries from the next room persisted. Susan massaged her aching head.

Mary ignored the question. She crouched beside a dresser and rifled through an open clothes drawer. `Here - they did not search well, for they did not find all. One of Goody Proctor's tools remains.'

Susan realised then what she was about to see. Mary had told her of it when last she had visited. She was not surprised, then, to have a rag doll thrust eagerly into her

hands, as if it validated her friend's every claim. It was similar to the one that she had found in Bridget Bishop's luggage. (Could Bridget really have been a witch? She had hinted as much. But no, that was stupid.) A rough) shapeless body made of rags, bound together with twine to give some semblance of form. It had been stuffed into a carefully sewn miniature dress, a twist of fabric left to protrude from the collar. A makeshift head.

The doll was skewered by three pins.

An animal skittered through the undergrowth at ankle height. Barbara started and held her lantern aloft, but saw only shadows. Mud and leaves clung to her dragging skirts and she was heartily sick of this forest. Night had come too quickly, light stolen by blossoming trees. She should have heeded her companion and agreed to set out from the TARDIS earlier. Ian made no accusations - he was not one for dwelling on past mistakes, preferring to work on solutions - but Barbara could have kicked herself. They were lost, and it was her fault.

`I don't recognise any of this,' she said gloomily.

`It looks different by lantern light.'

`Even so, Ian, I think we should go back.'

He was reluctant. `We can't be too far from the village now.'

`We could be. This forest could go on for miles, westward.'

`I suppose you're right.'

`We could always try again, once we get back to the TARDIS. Perhaps we could even find a compass there.'

This seemed to cheer Ian up. He nodded his consent, and

they turned and headed back the way they had come. But they had taken no more than a dozen steps before their paths diverged. They stopped and stared at each other. 'I thought we came this way' said Ian, pointing.

No, it was definitely this way.

Well, if you're sure.'

'I... was. I remember being sure. I'm just not so sure now.'

Oh, great!

Well, if you hadn't said anything -'

'I just thought we came from up there!'

Barbara stamped her foot miserably. 'Oh, all these paths look the same to me. We'll never find our way back!'

'Come on,' said Ian decisively. He took her elbow and led her in the direction she had first chosen. 'We'll get nowhere by standing here arguing about it.'

They walked in silence for another few minutes.

Sometimes, Barbara's spirits were lifted by a familiar tree or a hoof-beaten path (this latter at least suggesting they were not too far west). At other times, they passed through places of which she had no recollection, and she became certain that even the familiar things had been but cruel deceptions of a hopeful mind. Such were her paranoid misgivings during this interminable journey that the first suggestion of release from the forest brought great comfort, even though it was in some ways a worrying development.

A light shone through the trees. A guttering flame, too large to have come from a lantern. A faint smell of acrid smoke pinched at Barbara's nostrils. A fire was burning. When they were close enough to fear discovery, they

crouched under cover, hooded their own lights and watched. They could see the fire more clearly now. Vague figures passed before it, merging too well with forest shadows. Barbara could hear low muttering voices, but could make out no words. She felt Ian twitching restlessly. He finally laid his lantern aside and announced that he wanted a closer look. She nodded and told him to be careful. He bent low, made his way towards the flames, and was soon lost to her sight.

The muttering ceased and Barbara held her breath, lest the sound of it disturb the silence and bring night creatures down upon her. Behind her, hushes rustled with the passing of another invisible nocturnal dweller. She felt lonely, cold and exposed.

There was a dull thump, and Ian cried out: a truncated yelp of surprise and pain. Something heavy crashed into the forest floor.

And cold hands seized Barbara's neck and she screamed out loud.

Susan was hot, even beneath one thin cotton sheet. Her headache was more insistent than ever and she felt as if her brain was about to split. 'You've probably caught some local virus,' her grandfather had told her, not without sympathy. 'One might almost say it's an occupational hazard. Now if we were to return to the Ship...'

'I'm not leaving,' she had said firmly. It wasn't just because of the unfairness of history any more.

The Doctor sat with his back to her bed, reading. A religious tract, like all the colony's books, enlivened by lurid descriptions of evildoings and the fates to befall their perpetrators. Every so often, he tutted and shook his head. Ever the man of science, of logic, of reason. But reason didn't work here. She remembered the night in the parsonage, the helplessness as something else took control

of her body. She had been trying to impose her view of reality - no, the Doctor's view - on Mary and Parris and all the rest. But what if she was wrong? She clung to Elizabeth Proctor's doll. She had not needed to sleep with a toy for many years. She had taken this one from Mary with thoughts of showing it to her grandfather, removing the pins because it had seemed the right thing to do. She had changed her mind now. She wanted to form her own opinions.

Susan didn't know what her next move would be. She didn't know what she was aiming to do any more. She only wanted the confusion to end.

She wanted to understand.

Mary fell into a chair, exhausted. She should have been gathering firewood to see her through the next week, but Susan's unexpected visit and the demands of her master's children had kept her too occupied and it was late now. The children were asleep, thank God, and she needed a moment's respite before she attended to the last of her day's duties. Then she could hang the rope bed in the next room and go to her own rest, at least for a few hours until she had to prepare breakfast. Just a moment's respite. She heard a noise in the kitchen and jerked herself upright, tired no longer. A footstep. The clatter of a careless hand against a pot. Shallow breathing. Goodman Proctor, released from jail, come to punish her for not taking care of his family as she should? The sheriff, keen to steal yet more of the few comforts that remained to her? Or something worse? Mary was on her feet by the time they appeared in the doorway, but she could not muster the strength to fight nor the voice to scream. The cloaked figures - three of them? four? - swooped upon her and she was wrestled to the floor, a heavy sack thrust unceremoniously over her head and tied about her chest. Still incapable of speech, she realised that black magic had paralysed her tongue just as it had sapped the vitality from her muscles.

Borne aloft on the witches' shoulders, she passed out to the sound of evil cackling and the faint aroma of incense.

Ian was on his knees and the world was awash with bright primary colours. He blinked ferociously and forced himself to concentrate, to stay awake. He scrambled out of the path of the next blow and used a coarse purple sponge (a tree, his hibernating mind told him) to help him climb to his feet. He was ready for the third attack, clumsy as it was. The stick cracked against the bones in his wrist, but he could indulge the pain of it later. He wrested the makeshift weapon from the gnarled fingers of the red spectre (a woman, cloaked) and waved it in a vague threat, taking two dizzy steps back as reality began to reclaim his senses. He was still in the forest (for a moment, he hadn't been sure). He could feel the distant warmth of the fire behind him. Three women regarded him with hateful glares. They were dirty and unkempt, their clothes old and ragged. One of them - a black, grey-haired woman with wild, staring eyes - had Barbara, her arm twisted behind her back. Ian's breeches had torn against something. Blood trickled into his shoe. A persistent ache undermined his skull and reached around to his temples. His fingers went numb and the stick fell out of his grasp.

Barbara was by his side instantly, pulling free from her captor with an expression of disdain. She supported Ian until he had regained enough strength to stand on his own. The frightened women hissed and murmured. One took a timid step forward but brought herself up short.

'What do you want with us?' demanded Barbara. She was answered by uneasy shuffling; more murmurs. 'Why did you attack us?'

'I think they're scared of us,' said Ian, smiling grimly to hide his discomfort. 'That's right, isn't it?'

'The Devil will take those who betray the coven: the black woman spat. 'A curse upon the both of you, should you tell

of this.'

He found himself laughing giddily, from the stomach.

`You're not telling us you're actually witches?'

`You would be advised to show us respect.'

`Threats will not be enough, Candy,' insisted the youngest of the three. She was making a feeble attempt to hide her face with a hand. `They will tell Sheriff Corwin of this and we shall be hanged for sure. We should not have conducted the ceremony here tonight. I said the portents were grim; did I not say it?'

`What would you have me do with them?' snapped the woman who had been identified as Candy, in a fierce undertone. `Kill them?'

But they saw us dancing!'

Listen,' Barbara spoke up bravely, `we're not meant to be in this forest any more than you are. We can't tell anything about your ceremony without giving ourselves away. Well, can we?'

Her words seemed to have an effect. The younger woman withdrew, and there was silence for a time but for the crackling of flames. All awaited the decision of Candy. At last, she sighed and drew herself to her full, not quite impressive, height. `We have warned you, strangers,' she warbled in a throaty approximation of a menacing tone. Never say we did not. May you choke upon the Devil's own blood if you but think to reveal what you have seen tonight. And may his familiars feast on your eyes and peck out your tongues!' Seeming satisfied with this threat, she beckoned sharply to her comrades and they slunk away through the trees. The two teachers watched on in disbelief.

`Ian, what just happened here?' Barbara no longer

sounded quite so confident. They linked arms for mutual reassurance.

'We've just been cursed,' he said incredulously, the words sounding bizarre as he formed them. 'By a coven of witches, apparently. But I thought there were no real witches in Salem.'

'Yes,' muttered Barbara thoughtfully. 'I did, too.'

Mary Warren begged for mercy. She appealed to whatever human sentiment the witches had left, but they proved to be irredeemable. After a harrowing journey by broomstick, the sack had been removed from her head and she could see the parsonage not far distant. She wanted to run to it, but her hooded tormentors were too numerous. 'No comfort from the minister, dear. we make the rules in this church. His faith has no power over us.'

She was dragged across the cold field and thrown into a kneeling position before a low lectern. Upon it lay a book so black that it drew the very moonlight into its depths. She had seen it before, on the worst night of her life. It opened of its own accord, the crackling of its pages like lightning, and she was confronted by her own signature made in blood. 'You once put your name to the Devil's book, girl. Your soul belongs to him now. If you will not serve as you swore to, he will loan it to us to play with.'

No!' she whimpered. She reached for the cursed page as if to wipe the blood from it, take it back into her arm, It fizzed and hissed at her and she was repulsed. She nursed her stinging fingers and felt acid tears welling on to her cheeks. 'I was coerced into signing it. I turn to God, I turn to God!'

An awful shrieking broke out, and the witches pinched her and kicked her. A yellow bird squawked and a black cat spat in anger. 'Do not speak that foul name here!' she was instructed.

An uncommonly mutinous streak rose within her, and she closed her eyes and swallowed and tried to recite the Lord's Prayer aloud. Her throat dried, something stopped her tongue and she cried with the frustration of it. The yellow bird cackled its glee. 'You do not ought to do this to me,' she cried. The courts will find you out and you will be hanged for your crimes, like Goodwife Bishop.'

And who will tell the courts?' Pinch, kick. 'Not you, damned child.' Kick, scratch. 'For you know what torments await if you offend your master further.' Scratch, bite. 'He is not my master!' Mary could feel their spectres squeezing into the cracks of her soul, exciting her into another fit. She held it down. She was toppled backward and she stared into the sky. Grey thunder clouds rolled across the black expanse. red hellfire flickering at their edges. The witches swarmed over her and pinned her arms and legs. A silver goblet was put to her mouth and she was commanded to drink. She refused and tried to withdraw her lips, to keep the taste of the vile concoction from them. She thrashed and squealed but could not break free.

Birds circled overhead: ~witches' familiars with their mistresses' faces. One dared to swoop down and peck its sharp beak into her cheek. It suckled on her blood (and Mary feared that she would grow a witch's teat on that spot) and flapped away, bloated. She recognised its features and wanted to scream, but the blood would fill her mouth if she opened it.

'So you know my face.' The witch who held the cup loomed over her. 'But in truth, you already knew me to be a member of this church. You heard my blasphemous preachings and did nothing. You watched as I took the wicked tool of my cohort, Elizabeth Proctor, for my own - and yet you did nothing still. You are as evil as I, my friend. Your name is in the Devil's book and you need only partake of this sacrament to renew your allegiance.'

'I can't!'

The witch snatched her hood away and, though it came as no surprise, Mary gasped at the revelation of the face beneath. The face of a former friend, but hardened, devoid of all compassion and mercy

`How can you do this to me?' she pleaded.

'Drink!' commanded Susan Chesterton. `Drink' And somewhere, as if from a great distance, Mary could hear the sounding of a horn. The midnight call to the witches' sacrament. She fought to keep her spectre from answering that summons. But she had lost all control. She felt a great convulsion whip through her body. Her mouth opened to scream and Susan poured the blood triumphantly down her throat. It slithered, thick and foul, into her stomach. A hand twisted in her heart. Her eyes rolled back into her skull and saw only darkness.

The darkness lasted for a long, long time.

1 July 1692

Mary had been returned to the Proctors' home, to the very chair in which she had been sitting when the witches had attacked. Light filtered through the cracks of the shutters and the oil lamp had almost burnt itself out. She had slept for some time, but it had been an unnatural sleep and she was not refreshed. Her eyeballs ached. Her skin tingled with the recollection of last night's abuses and her stomach strained to empty itself of the contents of Susan's goblet. She threw herself across the room and was violently, painfully, sick into the fireplace. Her stomach continued to wretch, even once emptied. She felt light-headed and hollow, and she remained on her knees and wept for a peace that had never been hers.

Marked out for damnation. The back of her father's hand across her face, his disappointed scowl. Why can't Mary find a man like other girls in town? No more than a burden. Why should anyone be interested? No verve, no confidence and scarcely attractive. Father told her so. Unmarried at twenty, deprived of the chance to make home for husband and children. Father, still disapproving in his grave. Passing on the curse. A new family, someone else's children to wait on. A change of location. A new life, old problems. Who wanted Mary Warren? The curse found her even here. The Proctors, damned for their kindness. Should have left her alone. Let her turn into the bitter, lonely old crone who waited at life's end. Don't get too close.

She was choking on tears. She barely heard the door open behind her; wiped a sleeve across her streaked face as one of the Proctor children padded across the floorboards. She couldn't even remember his name. Her mind was awlirl.

`I can't sleep, Mary. May I have some water?'

She felt embarrassed, compromised, angry. `You know the well has dried up, and I do not have time to fetch from the stream every day. We must all do without in these troubled

times.'

'I am thirsty.'

'Do as you are told!' she cried. 'Go back to your bed, before I smack you!' She raised a threatening hand and he scampered away. She froze, looked at what she was doing, sobbed again and collapsed back on to her hands and knees. Warm tendrils caressed her neck. The early-morning sun was straining to penetrate the shutters. The boy reminded her of his father. She breathed deeply and tried to calm herself, to put her shattered thoughts back into order. John Proctor loomed at their centre. Her surrogate parent. He had been good to her and fair, accepting Mary into his home. Treating her as his own. Her first real family. He had whipped her only when she had misbehaved. She had condemned him to imprisonment and almost certain death in return. Not a minute passed that it did not grieve her. But what else could she have done? For all his superficial generosity; her master had a cruel temper. And he practised the black arts. Though she doubted it sometimes, she had seen this to be true. The Bible prescribed only one punishment for such sins. John Proctor deserved his death.

Just as Susan deserved it too.

She had revealed her true nature now, and it was a further sadness upon young Mary's shoulders. Her duty was clear. She mourned for the passing of another friend, for Susan had to be punished. It was not what Mary wanted. It was simply what must be.

Barbara lay back on the Doctor's bed, stretching her limbs and luxuriating in the feel of the soft, straw-packed mattress. Her muscles ached from a night spent outdoors with Ian, in the glow of the witches' dwindling fire, hardly daring to doze. The sun had brought its fresh perspective, at last, and enabled the two teachers to reach Salem Village without further difficulty. After all that, they had found the

Doctor and Susan alone and unharmed in a guest room at the inn. The Doctor was not pleased to see them, and Barbara closed her weary eyes and tried to ignore the predictable argument that flared between the two men. As voices were raised, Susan stirred on the other bed and groaned, bringing a halt to the exchange. –

She has been like this since yesterday,' said the Doctor, as the three adults gathered around the sleeping girl and exchanged concerned looks. I imagine she has picked up some local ailment: influenza or whatnot. If she would come back to the TARDIS with me. I could run a proper diagnosis. But she is an obstinate child.'

`Hmm. I wonder where she gets that from,' mused Ian.

The Doctor shot him a sharp look.

Susan's eyelids flickered and she muttered something that sounded like, `I'm sorry, Mary, I didn't mean to do it.'
`Just what is going on here, Doctor?' asked Barbara.

`Going on? I'm not sure that anything is "going on", as you put it.' He raised a quizzical eyebrow.

`You know what I mean. Something's wrong.'

`We actually came across a coven in the forest,' said Ian.

`Oh, did you?' The Doctor's eyebrows shot up to his hairline now, and he seemed to be straining not to laugh.

`Three grown women, dancing around a fire and casting spells,' said Barbara. `They even tried to put a curse on us.'

`Something's gone wrong with history, hasn't it, Doctor?'

`Oh? And what makes you think that, Chesterton?'

`Well...' Ian clearly hadn't expected to have to explain it.

He struggled for words, making vague circling motions with his hand. `This isn't what's supposed to have happened. is it? I mean. there were no actual witches in Salem. were there?'

'Oh my dear boy' said the Doctor - and this time he actually did laugh - no witches? None at all? Whatever could have given you such a preposterous idea?

Samuel Parris marched briskly into the parsonage and flung his cloak and hat on to their pegs. He would have gone straight upstairs, to look in on his ailing wife before settling to work in his study, but the unusual silence bothered him. Instead, he flung open the door to the main room and was aggrieved to find his niece dozing at the spinning wheel.

`Abigail!' he thundered. She jerked upright, her foot reflexively and half-heartedly working the treadle. The purple rims of her eyes stood out against the sallow complexion of her skin. Her long blonde hair was in disarray and it seemed she had been crying. Her apron and long-gown were dishevelled. A wave of sympathy threatened to soften Parris's attitude, but he denied it. It would do the girl no good to be cosseted. `No charge of mine sits idle where there is God's work to be done. Would you allow the Devil further into your heart?'

`N-no, sir.'

`Then `tis time you dedicated yourself, girl - else surely you will be damned to the pits of Hell.'

`I was only sleeping, Uncle. I am fair tired.'

`Do not question God's edicts, child!' He glared at her and, under the force of his scorn, she renewed her efforts. `It is partly your doing that Tituba rots in the witches' jail and I have had to send Betty away. There is much to be done here. Abigail, and only the Devil will be served if you choose to shirk your responsibilities.'

She was working now with as much vigour as she could muster, and Parris watched in satisfaction. The stench of evil still clung to her, but that evil might yet be driven out. She could be saved.

Sometimes,' he grumbled, just loud enough for her to hear, I ask myself what your poor dead parents would think of you, that cavorts in the forest and invites Satan into our midst:

What we are seeing here: said the Doctor, `is a classic outbreak of hysteria: He settled back in his chair and interlaced his fingers across his chest, tapping his free thumbs together. `And, of course, I mean that in the strictest medical sense. It's hardly surprising, in such a devoutly puritanical colony. Repressed emotions have a nasty habit of bubbling to the surface, often with drastic consequences.'

`Yes, I've heard that before,' said Barbara. `It explains why the girls are having fits, anyway.'

`And girls in particular,' said the Doctor. `Boys, at least, are allowed some outlets for youthful exuberance: hunting and the like.'

`What about the women in the forest?'

The Doctor waved a gently admonishing finger. `You're getting ahead of yourself, my dear. The thing we need to ask is how the villagers interpret what is happening to them. They don't have the knowledge to diagnose hysteria as we can. To their eyes, the girls' fits are far too severe to be natural at air

But witchcraft seems a bit of an unlikely conclusion: said Ian. Susan murmured something to herself and rolled over. Not in this time and place. To the people here. the occult has a very real presence. It is as tangible as the chairs we are sitting in. the walls about us. This colony is founded on just

such a tenet. And, thanks to the teachings of Parns anu Ins ilk, every person in it believes implicitly in the existence of a God and a Devil, of Heaven and Hell. Every day of their lives, they fear punishment for their sins. So if any occurrence cannot be explained away by their limited science, then what else are they to make of it, hmm?'

Ian chewed on his lip thoughtfully. 'I can accept that, I suppose. And aren't hallucinations supposed to be one symptom of hysteria?'

'Precisely, my boy, precisely. The children see witches because that is what they fear most - just as some Americans of your century imagined themselves abducted by aliens?'

Ian laughed hollowly. 'To some English men, that really happened.'

The Doctor coughed as if embarrassed, and stammered slightly as he resumed his discourse. 'There are other types of delusion too. Some people, whose fits might be outwardly less obvious, dream of suffering witchcraft attacks, or witnessing them.'

'Or causing them,' said Barbara with sudden realisation. The Doctor nodded encouragingly and she continued: 'Of course. If the villagers are made to feel so guilty all the time, some could be most afraid of being visited by the Devil and forced to join him.'

They might even welcome it,' remarked Ian. 'Candy and her friends didn't look like unwilling converts to me.' Quite, quite. Your conventional history has it that none of the Salem witches were guilty of that crime, simply because your historians could not conceive of such a thing. But guilty some of them most certainly were.'

'Not people like Rebecca Nurse, though,' protested Barbara.

`No.' The Doctor frowned and, if they noticed his sudden reticence, his companions didn't comment.

'I still don't understand,' said Ian. `Why would anyone want to be a witch?'

The Doctor shrugged. `Power. The thrill of doing such an immense wrong in such a repressive society In a perverse way, even social standing. Suspected witches enjoyed a certain amount of notoriety, you know, when times were better.'

`What do you mean, "power"?'`

`Think about it, Chesterton. Who will deny you a kindness if they think you have the ability to cause them mischief with a few well-chosen words or a shake of the head?'

`That's nonsense!'

`Anything but, my boy. Winters are harsh here and disease rife. Crops fail, people and animals sicken. Whenever such misfortune strikes, the tendency of some is to look to their neighbours; to recall old arguments and ill wishes. That's when the accusations start to fly. Not to mention those who deliberately curse others.'

Bridget Bishop said something to Ann Putnam in the marketplace,' recalled Barbara. Ann stumbled a few minutes later and blamed Bridget. She claimed she had cursed her.' And in all probability, my dear, she had. The woman fell because she expected to, because she believed in this Bridget Bishop's powers. The human brain is a complex organ. With the right stimulus, it can even simulate illness or bruising, if it expects to suffer them.'

So you're saying that curses can have an effect, said Ian, on a psychosomatic level?'

`I am saying that magic works here, in every important

sense - and, this being the case, human nature is such that some people will take advantage of it.' The Doctor beamed with satisfaction at a point well made. `That, my friends, is why there are witches in Salem Village.

As late afternoon segued into evening, Susan stood before the Nurses' door and looked to Ian for reassurance before knocking. She had woken only a few hours earlier, astonished to find she had slept so long. She felt better, but something still buzzed in the back of her head. Her mind threw up unwanted images of cloaks and dancing and blood. Ghost echoes of unpleasant dreams. Despite them, she had used her new-found clarity of thought to make plans. Ignoring her grandfather's hints about a return to the TARDIS, she had pleaded with Ian to introduce her to Francis Nurse. He had acceded, eventually.

Francis looked surprised to find the pair on his doorstep. With a quick look over his shoulder, he joined them outside and closed the door behind him. `Ian, I knew not of your return.'

`I came back just this morning. I heard about your wife. I'm so sorry; Francis.'

A shadow of despair passed over his strong, angular face.

`It is not lost yet. We have good reason to claim that the verdict on Rebecca was unjust. We plan to appeal to the Governor of the colony.'

`That's good,' said Ian approvingly.

`And that's why we're here,' put in Susan. `We want to help, in any way we can.' Francis seemed uncertain, so she pressed on, 'Don't you see? This is important to everyone. If we can persuade your Governor that his court was wrong about one woman.'

Francis drew Ian to one side, much to Susan's annoyance. He was ignoring her, as if she was no more than a child.

`Many things have been said about your daughter,' he confided, in a voice still loud enough for her to hear, `and about your own teachings. I know you to be a good, hard-working Christian man, and yet I have heard what Susan said to John Proctor - and the minister himself has preached against your family at meetings. Surely you can understand my quandary?'

`You don't want us to be associated with your campaign?'

Francis shrugged helplessly and Susan's temper boiled over. `Can't you understand?' she cried. `They're doing the same thing to us as they're doing to you. Spreading rumours. Telling lies. We're no more evil than you are.'

`We do only want to help,' Ian interjected, laying a firm calming hand upon Susan's arm. `We have no doubt that Rebecca is innocent.'

Francis glanced back at the house again, apparently wondering what his friends within would think of this development. But he had made a decision. `I suppose I am in no position to refuse assistance, he said with a grim nod, and I would be most grateful for yours.

Susan grinned as Francis Nurse held open the door and welcomed his new supporters across the threshold.

My uncle is at work upstairs,' warned Abigail, drawing Mary into the kitchen. `If he hears us and comes down, you must say you have come to buy cheese and butter. He knows you are left alone with the Proctor children and will not think you idle for not making your own.'

`Oh, Abigail, `tis true I can barely cope. The work would be hard enough, even were it not for..., what is happening.' `You have been tormented again.' It was not a question: rather a statement. Abigail was perceptive. Recent troubles had taken a bright, mischievous, strong-willed eleven-year-old girl and hardened her. She was still a girl in form, but an

adult's eyes peered out from what now seemed no more than a pale and scrawny shell. An adult's sorrow, an adult's wisdom. An adult's strength. Mary often turned to her for comfort when things were at their worst, despite her younger years. But such comfort was tempered by the knowledge that Abigail Williams could be an implacable foe. And that, when the Devil attacked, she became a screaming, terrified child again.

`I was taken last night,' she admitted, trembling. `They brought me to the field behind this very parsonage and made me to drink of the Devil's blood, Oh, Abigail, how I prayed for you or the minister to look out of your window and see.'

They mock our efforts to find them. They flaunt their wickedness before our eyes. But one day they will dare too much.' They said I have made a covenant with the Devil, and it cannot be broken.'

Abigail took Mary's hands and imparted some of her strength. You did an evil thing in signing the Devil's book, but God knows you be truly repentful of it. He will guide you., Mary felt herself crying. `Then where was he last night?

Why did he allow the Devil's servants to set about me so?' She tried not to think of being held down, pinched, kicked, punched, forced to drink... If it was to happen again, she would surely die.

`He cannot spare us all our suffering,' said Abigail, 'but if he does believe in your goodness, then he will have given you the power to see who tormented you.' She raised a deliberate eyebrow. `Did he do such a thing last night?' Mary swallowed and remained silent, but knew that she had answered the question in so doing. `Who was it, Mary?'

`It was no one. It was dark and they were hooded.'

`If you can keep this from me, then God will not help you

to dispute the Devil's claim upon your soul.' Abigail's aspect had darkened. She exhibited all the authority with which her uncle preached intolerance and damnation to his church.

`But what if we are deceived? What if Rebecca Nurse spoke the truth? What if we are shown falsehoods, and thus condemn good men?'

`These revelations come from God,' said Abigail. more softly now, more sympathetic, 'and if they reveal ill things of those we have chosen to respect and trust, then this only shows how the Devil has manipulated our hearts.'

Mary closed her eyes and shook her head, but could not summon the arguments with which to dispute Abigail's claims. She thought of John Proctor and knew she could not bear the responsibility of sending yet one more to join him. But was this not God's way of testing her? Susan had admitted to her crimes, so what doubt could there be? `If we are to turn a blind eye to sin,' prompted Abigail. *then we shall ourselves become sinful.' The Reverend Parris had often spoken similar words himself, `Who is it, Mary? Who torments you now?'

And, because she knew it was the right thing to do. Man told her.

Ian hid his surprise at the document that was passed to him. The words were barely legible and inconsistently spelled. Ink had blotched in several places, obscuring some letters. Rebecca Nurse had even added a `k' to her own name. He had expected better of her, but then he had been applying the standards of Coal Hill School to a society in which writing was not yet commonplace. His own demonstration of the skill had earned him respect; even this painful scrawl would be looked upon as the product of a fine mind.

He struggled through the statement, distilling meaning

from its overly formal and wordy style. Rebecca testified, once again, to her innocence. On the matter of Deliverance Hobbs, she claimed to have referred to her only as a fellow prisoner, not as a fellow witch. She was 'hard of hearing and full of grief' and did not recall being questioned on the subject. Ian nodded and passed the parchment down the line. 'It says all it should.'

'Do you think it might sway Governor Phips?' asked thoughtful old Israel Porter.

Well it must cast some doubt upon the verdict.'

We need more than doubt,' insisted Peter Cloyse, obstreperous as ever. We need to show Phips that Stoughton's court is corrupt; that he has given undue weight to so-called spectral evidence and condemned good people to die without proof.' Cloyse's wife - Rebecca's sister - was awaiting trial in prison, so Ian could understand his impatience. The group had long debated tactics before deciding to concentrate on Rebecca's appeal above all others. Her case was the most solid and she held the respect of many people. Once she was pardoned, the fidelity of the court would be called into question and others would benefit. To such as Cloyse, though, it must have seemed a lengthy process.

To Susan, too. She was seated on the bare boards of the floor - so packed was the Nurses' tiny downstairs room with friends and family that no chairs remained - and she fidgeted impatiently through all this talk but kept her own counsel. Ian was growing concerned about her. She seemed pale and tired. He resolved that the pair should make their excuses and leave soon.

'Has anyone spoken to the foreman of the jury?' he asked.

'Fisk?' said Francis.

'That's right - Thomas Fisk, isn't it? What are his feelings

about this?'

'He is a good man,' considered Francis.

'Then perhaps he can make a statement too. If he can confirm that the decision was only reached because Rebecca didn't answer his question; that they would have found for her otherwise...:

It would reinforce much of what we claim; agreed Porter. and a murmur of excitement circled the room at the idea. 'Fisk could also give the jury's reasons for the original not-guilty verdict,' piped up Samuel Nurse, one of Rebecca and Francis's sons. 'In that way, the reversal will seem all the more mistaken.'

And the main thing,' said Ian, 'is to make it absolutely clear that this business with Deliverance Hobbs was the deciding factor in that change of heart. If we can establish that beyond question, and then explain what actually happened -,

He didn't have to conclude the sentence. The reaction was louder this time, the group's spirits buoyed by the almost tangible prospect of success.

'And yet we must not build our hopes too high; Francis cautioned, raising a hand for silence. 'Still, the minister works against us in this endeavour. He walks the village and spreads word that we would collude with Satan to see his followers set free.'

'Hang the minister,' muttered Cloyse under his breath. 'He works only to his own ends, 'tis true,' said Francis soberly. 'But we must not underestimate him. He could yet prove to be our greatest enemy.'

Barbara was beginning to regret her own altruism. Ian and Susan had not yet returned and, needing water, she had insisted on collecting it herself rather than burdening the

Doctor. But the well had yielded only trickles and she had had to make a three-mile round trip to the stream with her heavy pail. Water sloshed over its sides and dampened her skirts. She sighed in relief as she approached the dull lights of Ingersoll's tavern and heard voices within. The establishment was packed as always, and she only hoped to negotiate the crowd and reach the stairs without inviting attention.

In this desire, she was frustrated. One group parted to allow her through; a second did not. She was surrounded. She came up short and momentarily lost control of her burden. The pail banged against a skirted leg and slopped water on to hand-stitched shoes. Ann Putnam Senior shrieked her disgust and Barbara became the centre of attention. 'Oh I'm sorry,' she stammered, 'I didn't mean -' 'Goodwife Chesterton!' bellowed Ann, wringing out her skirts and exaggerating every motion. 'I might have known it should be you who would contrive to cause such misfortune. I have not forgotten how you stumbled against me in the marketplace.'

'That was an accident too.'

'You were in league with the witch Bishop!'

'I helped you up, remember?'

'I have heard about your family now, madam. I only wish I had known enough to avoid you when last you blighted Salem with your presence:

You're talking nonsense!'

The crowd shifted and a heavily built man with a moustache and a ring of unruly hair around a bald patch took Ann in his arms. Barbara recognised Thomas Putnam from his habitual scowl. 'Why do you return to this place, witch? What do you want with these good people?'

She rounded on him. `Now listen to me. you narrow-minded old -,

`Have a care, my husband, she seeks to curse us!' Aim broke free of Thomas's embrace, seeming genuinely afraid, She backed away, but was impeded by a wall of people. She threw up her arms and turned her face away. `In the name of the Lord, avoid!'

`I'm no witch!' protested Barbara hotly, but the tavern-goers had closed in and she could sense their suspicion and hostility as much as hear it in their mutterings and intakes of breath. Nobody dared to touch her, but she felt all too keenly the oppressive heat of their tightly packed bodies. She was not normally claustrophobic, but she felt stifled now by a cage of flesh. She wanted to scream or faint.

`We should call in the militia,' opined somebody. `Where is Lieutenant Ingersoll?'

`Fetch the minister,' suggested another voice. The mutterings grew louder. Ann Putnam made great play of falling to her knees and offering a prayer to God.

There was something rising in the small room. A mob mentality. An outpouring of emotion from a crowd united by purpose. A psychological phenomenon, though it seemed too tangible to describe thus. It was as if some force had left each villager's soul; dozens of tiny parcels of suspicion and spite coagulating into one invisible whole. It hung over them, charging the atmosphere, feeding back into its creators and magnifying the emotions of which it was born. Ensuring that this confrontation could end only in tragedy. It was the spirit of the witch-hunt: the product of a community in tear. Fear of God, of the Devil and of everything that lay in between.

The spirit poked and prodded at its progenitors, goading them into the sort of actions that they would be unable to explain later. But it was stricken by a sudden stern voice, a

commanding presence. An old man, yet one who exuded strength and authority The Doctor.

`Enough!' he cried. And the spirit was fractured and lost its hold. He was on the stairs, towering over them all. Barbara had rarely seen him so angry. `And what do you think you are doing, hmm? On what basis do you accuse this woman? Have you, any of you, seen her do wrong? Have you even heard her say anything untoward? Well, have you?'

`We have all heard of her perfidy,' said Thomas Putnam, and there were one or two grunts of assent.

`Oh, have you indeed? Rumours, gossip, tittle-tattle! And you would condemn an innocent woman on such so-called evidence?'

`God would have us root out the sinners in our midst.'

`It is not God's work you have done today, my good fellow'

Thomas Putnam glared hatred at the newcomer, but people were shifting uncomfortably and some were edging away, gaining distance from the argument. Some people were looking dazed and wondering what had just happened to them The Doctors face softened and he reached out to his companion 'Come along. my dear: 'This time, a passage was cleared for her She staggered along it with her water keeping her eyes downcast. She took a deep breath and released it gratefully as she joined the Doctor and he swept her up the stairs. He paused to give one last word of advice to her erstwhile tormentors. He spoke quietly. but his voice carried easily through thick silence. Remember - it is far better to let the guilty go unpunished than to make the innocent suffer.'

When supper did not arrive, Parris left his study and strode downstairs to the kitchen. His ire rose at the sight of Abigail, asleep on a stool, hair splayed across the working surface. Stew boiled over a hungry fire, flames lapping at

the pot like hissing demons awaiting a chance to invade his good house.

He roared his niece's name and wrenched her to her feet.
`By God, what will it take to turn you from this sinful path?'

`Oh, Uncle, I am sorry, I...!' She looked startled and confused. She was trying to shake the sleep from her head.

`You deserve what ills befall you, Abigail. You do naught to return God's love for you with your slothfulness!'

`No!' shouted Abigail. `God has no love for me. Nobody has!'
`How dare you say such a thing?'

`You sent Betty away when the Devil turned his sights upon her, and she is molested no more. Yet you make me to stay here and suffer.'

You are older than Betty. Your duty is to confront this evil.'
No. I am no daughter of yours, and you do not love me as one.'

`Abigail!'

Too late. She pushed past him and would have hurled herself on to the fire had he not seized her in time. He turned her around and slapped her across the face, regretting his haste almost instantly. She was not in control of her actions. The demons had taken her again.

One remnant of his niece peered through a mask of hate, as she put a hand to her cheek, stung, and threatened to cry.
`I am sorry, Uncle, I do not know what... I don't.., no!' She jerked as if struck again. `No, do not do this to me. Please, no more. No more!'

She fell to her knees, twitching and yelping at each new phantom blow. The witches were attacking her, though she was but a child and could not deserve such pain. Parris rushed to her side and assured her of his love, but could

offer no more than cold comfort. And, eventually, retribution. `What have I done to you, that you would treat me so?' pleaded Abigail. `Oh God, please help me. In the name of the Lord, avoid. Avoid!'

Then her pleas were reduced to mere babbling; her convulsions became more frequent and violent. Parris shook her and asked the question. The one that mattered. `Who does this? Who torments you this time?'

`S-Susan,' she whispered. `Susan Ches-'

Then her tongue was stopped as the fit began in earnest.

2 July 1692

From the parsonage, it takes but two minutes to reach the highest point of Salem Village. Past Ingersolls tavern lies the crossroads, whereon meetinghouse and watchtower stand at opposite corners, twin guardians of soul and bod~ From here, verdant fields slope all ways, freckled with the simple homes of local farmers. The wooden buildings become more widely spread, and smaller to the eye, with distance. Only the languid trails from brick chimneys provide proof that they are more than the children's toys they appear to be. The morning sun is greeted by tranquillity, but has scant time to enjoy it.

As soon as light allows, the colonists swarm about their business. They spill from the houses, take to shovel and plough. They tend to their herds, gather milk and water and crops. Samuel Parris stands and watches their black shapes against nature's pastel shades, performing their duties with almost mechanical familiarity. The drudge of everyday life, accepted with the knowledge that God will bless their endeavours. As it should be.

But lonely servants desire more than spiritual succour. And so it is that, soon enough, routine is broken and the patterns of life become haphazard. Distant figures begin to converge; paths are crossed. They call on neighbours to ask for advice, barter for goods, any reason they can find. And, most importantly, they talk. Did you hear that Giles Corey seeks to recant his accusation of his wife? Did you see how Sarah Good swore at the court? What news of the poor children? Speculation and rumour are rife, pumped around the village like blood around arteries. But the heart has been displaced. At the crossroads, Parris stands and prays for a community fragmented, directionless, at war with itself. The flow of information oft-times passes him by now. His services are better attended than ever, but polluted by whispered suspicions. His sermons have become more strident, his hectoring more forceful. But Sarah Cloyse still stormed out of the meetinghouse when he preached

against her sister, Rebecca Nurse. And they stifi talk of the rising of the Devil in his own home. Goodwife Cloyse is in the witches' jail now, of course. But, as to the other, is that not precisely Satan's plan? The village cannot be saved if its people will not trust in their minister's guidance.

Samuel Parris works harder than any of them, in these dying days. He seeks out information that will not come to him unbidden, makes difficult decisions - with the help and blessing of God, of course - and uses what considerable influence he still has to guide events along their best course. Today, his mind is occupied by the Chestertons. He cannot forget how the outbreak of strife coincided so closely with their first visit to the colony. And now they have returned, to spread their heresies anew.

Parris needs time to consider how best to act. Susan, he has long suspected, is under the malign influence of higher forces. The responsibility for her actions lies with her parents. The Chesterton family could provide the key to ending this horror, and he must be sure to deal with them appropriately. For the sake of his community For the sake of God. And most of all, for his own sake.

How could the native populace stand this, week after week? The sun be-at down on dry, cracked earth and Susan itched ferociously beneath her tight bodice The light, fresh chuckling of the depleted brook made her long for an ice-cold shower, or at least a bath. She felt drained and dirty Red circles crowded her vision. Shaking her head, she collapsed against the rail of the old bridge. Ian was by her side instantly.

`Hey, steady on, Susan. What's wrong?'

`It's nothing,' she claimed, not even convincing herself.

`You should do as the Doctor said, you know. Get some rest,'

`But what about -?'

`Go back to the inn,' he said firmly. `I'll do what I can to help Francis.'

`Do you promise?'

`I promise. Now come on, let's get you back to bed:

Susan shrugged off his supportive arm, `No, I can make it, you go on ahead. They'll be expecting us.'

He peered at her suspiciously, perhaps suspecting the truth. The Nurses' home lay just over the bridge; they were almost in sight of it. If they both turned back now, Grandfather might find a way of using Susan's illness to force a change of plan. She would rest easier knowing that Ian, at least, had completed the journey; that something was being done.

`Okay,' he said finally, reluctantly, `if you're sure.'

She grinned and nodded, willing herself to remain upright just until he was out of sight. She needn't have worried. She felt in much better health just facing the prospect of relaxation. She had not relished the idea of another day spent in Francis's stifling main room, listening to the same arguments over and over. Perhaps she could return to the TARDIS after all: bask in its cool light, free herself from this restrictive clothing, scrub the grime from her skin. Sleep off her tenacious headache and emerge, refreshed, for the next stage of battle. Perhaps.

The sight of Mary Warren stole the new-found buoyancy from her step. The young woman cut an undignified figure in her frenzied dash down the narrow dirt-track road from the tavern. ~Susan,' she panted, slowing to a walk as she approached. `Susan, thank goodness I have caught you. I must speak with you on a matter of some import.'

`If you've seen more so-called witches, I don't want to

hear it.'

Mary shook her head, too breathless to speak for a second. 'I... I know I did not welcome you as I should, when last we met. I can understand your beliefs, Susan. I used to share them. I used to believe that witches did not exist, and that the accusations made were no more than the basest of lies.'

'Then why -,

'You have not been tormented as have I!'

'Mary what is it?' asked Susan. The skin of her neck was suddenly prickling with the prospect of bad news. 'What's wrong?'

'When did we last meet? Please answer me, Susan, I must know.'

'Why, on Thursday.'

'Night or day?'

'Day, of course. In your home:

Oh Susan, I fear the Devil wears your shape*

'Mary no!'

'It is true. I saw it myself. You - he - carried me to the witches' congregation and bade me drink his blood. And, Susan, the worst of it is this: that Abigail made me tell.'

'The Devil's blood?' An image flashed across Susans mind. She was holding a goblet. A silver goblet. Red inside. And viscous.

'Do you not hear me? She will tell it to her uncle for sure. They will swear out a complaint against you. We must speak

to them first, tell them what a mistake they would make:

'We were in the field,' said Susan suddenly, not sure where the words were coming from. 'Behind the parsonage: Another fleeting memory 'We were holding you down. Oh. Mary I wouldn't do that to you, but I remember. It's all so hazy, though.'

Mary stared at her, horrified, and Susan could not blame her. These terrible thoughts - these memories? - were bubbling up inside her, threatening to erupt, to roll over her and transform her into something... different. Something evil. 'Your familiar,' recalled Mary, almost speechless, backing away now. 'The bird, with your face, sucking on my blood.'

'I remember,' gasped Susan. And she did, the shared experience belying the dreamlike unreality that shrouded the events. 'But how is it possible? Mary none of those things could have happened.'

'So you say.' Close to tears now. 'But we both saw them. We both know. Oh, Susan, if you claim you had no hand in these doings, then I must believe you. But can you not see it? The Devil takes not merely your shape, but your soul too. We must see the minister. You must repent of your sins. You are one of us now, one of the afflicted.'

'No!' They were both crying, Susan with the sheer frustration of having lost control; of being trapped in a world that no longer bowed to the rules of logic. They hugged each other tightly and a percussive of lights and sound played across Susan's forehead, threatening to drown out Mary's whispered, frightened prayer.

Within seconds, and without much conscious thought, she was whispering the prayer herself.

The first thing to impress itself upon the Doctor, as he descended the stone steps into the dungeon, was the stench. Salem Prison had been built to contain criminals,

not to attend to their health. Hygiene was a low priority. Mixed odours of sweat and excrement mingled with the rank smell of despair. He concentrated on keeping his footing, using his cane to feel out a path down the uneven stairs. These dungeons, beneath the prison building, had been hewn out of bedrock. The walls were rough and slimy and pools of fetid water had gathered in the hollows of the ground. Flickering torches made little effort to drive back the darkness. As if to complete the image, a distant wail and a steady drip met the Doctor's ears.

'I am perfectly capable of walking by myself, thank you,' he protested tetchily as his escort drove him on with a shove. The jailer just grunted and pushed him again. He stumbled into a heavy wooden door fixed across what, despite its near-symmetry, was little more than a cave mouth. Through its barred window, he could see that five or six hunched, ragged figures - barely recognisable as human beings - lay in the gloom beyond. A girl, no older than four, rolled over in uneasy sleep and was brought up short by chains. A rat skittered between two more of the shapeless mounds. The Doctor was transfixed by the image. appalled at the extent of their suffering. He berated himself inwardly for wanting to help. He must not interfere.

Then a filthy hand reached through the bars and seized his throat.

The Doctor spluttered, caught by surprise. 'Come to gloat at our misfortune, have you?' shrieked a coarse female voice. 'A pox upon you and your family. May your stinking bones rot in Hell!' The jailer was shouting something too, and fumbling with a bunch of keys. But the woman's grip was weak and soon broken. The Doctor pulled away from her and she let out a hoarse scream of anger and frustration, straining at the chains that bound her to the wall. The Doctor loosened his tie and regained control of his breathing. Then he heard a sharp crack and a cry of pain. The jailer was inside the cell now, and the force of his blow had knocked the thin, malnourished prisoner to the

ground. She spat at him and was rewarded with a boot to her stomach. As she keeled over, her attacker rained blow after blow upon her, with both fists and feet. She folded into a quivering ball and began to plead for mercy, but the punishment continued. The Doctor reacted instinctively.

`Leave that poor woman alone,' he bellowed, rushing into the affray and holding back the burly man's arm, hoping to keep his fist from landing again. `She has done no harm.' But he was rewarded by a casual flexing of muscles and a sweeping motion that propelled him backward into the wall.

`You have no authority here,' the jailer threatened, looming over him. `I will treat these prisoners as I wish, and as they deserve: As if to prove his point, he aimed a final, brutal kick at the woman's ribs. She whimpered and was stilt The Doctor said nothing as he was hustled back through the gate. It was not his business, he reminded himself. Not his place. not his time. So what was he doing here? it was the Nurse woman you wanted to see, yes?'

`That is correct, my good fellow: He brushed down his cloak and attempted to retain a dignified air despite the humiliation of his recent handling. `She is a good friend of my family.'

`Be glad I allow this visit and remain silent,' grunted the jailer. He beckoned him onward, deeper into the dungeon. The Doctor glanced back over his shoulder. The woman had not moved from her foetal position, nor had her cellmates so much as raised a head between them to see what had happened. The young girl was awake now and she cried into a filthy, torn sleeve,

`Ian Chesterton!'

Parris bellowed the name, and Ian leapt to his feet, startled by the minister's sudden presence. When Francis had gone to answer his door, the assembled group had assumed that more supporters had arrived. The appearance of Parris, and of Thomas Putnam, had taken them by surprise and had

decidedly dampened the hopeful atmosphere

`What business have you here? Parris thundered

`This is the man of whom you spoke? Putnam asked him.

`Oh, but this says something of your campaign: sn:~--ted Parris, addressing Francis, `that I fmd you in collusion with such as he.'

Such as what?' returned Francis angrily.

`A self-avowed follower of Satan!'

`I beg your pardon!' interrupted Ian. `I have never said anything of the kind, and certainly not to you.'

'Goodman Chesterton is as innocent of these things as is my wife.' Peter Cloyse joined in the attack. `As are many of those that you would condemn in your ignorance.'

`If you believe such words, then you are a fool or a sinner. Either way, you will invite the Devil into your heart.' Parris rounded on Ian, clearly seeing him as the primary threat.

`You have a nerve, sir, to come back here and see what misery you have wrought.'

`I beg your pardon?'

`Your sermons are not welcome here, Mr Parris.' Cold fury had brought Francis Nurse to life, imbuing him with more spirit than Ian had thought him to possess. He scowled at Thomas Putnam, who had remained darkly silent. `And nor is he that made the girls to cry out against poor Rebecca.'

`The girls cried out only because they were tormented.'

Francis and Putnam squared up to each other, but Paths interceded. Striding into the centre of the room, he turned to glare at each of its occupants in turn, `Gentlemen, ladies, I have not come here to engage in this squabbling. I have heard of your efforts to overturn the fair rulings of the court and I would advise you against so betraying God's will,

much less by consorting with his enemies.

`The only people who would will such malice upon their neighbours: growled Francis. are the Putnam clan and their cowardly allies'.

`Why must you set yourselves against me? cried Parris. `It is for the good of all that we should confront and fight the evil in our midst, however painful it may prove.' He looked around for support. but found none in the glowers of his audience. `I think it's time you both left: said Ian firmly, 'as Goodman Nurse has requested: He drew himself up to his full impressive height and stared down at the minister. Parris soon turned away and nodded curtly to his companion.

`The warning has been delivered,' he said, as they swept out of the room. Hostility gave way to relief at the sound of a closing door.

Israel Porter broke the silence. `We must act quickly, now we know it is the minister's intention to move against us.' Francis nodded. `Ian, perhaps you would be so kind as to accompany me to Fisk's home. I would have want of your keen mind and tongue as we ask him to make his statement.'

`Of course,' said Ian. `I'd be happy to help in any way I can.'

`It pleases me to hear you say that,' said Francis, `because I have yet one more boon to ask of you.'

`Doctor!'

Rebecca's tone was almost reverential. She stumbled towards him through the half-light. straining to see as if she could not believe what her eyes told her He was somewhat taken aback himself Though he had seen the conditions of other prisoners. he had hardly been able to imagine her in such a state Her noble bearing had been replaced by the painful. chain-hampered gait of the defeated and abused. she was filthy, and her clothes had been reduced to rags.

And yet still his arrival lit a spark or hope in her eyes. He wished he could allow himself to fan that fledgling flame. To see it extinguished now would be a shame indeed.

`I had given up hoping that you would ever return.'

'I had to see you,' said the Doctor. One last time, he thought.

`You have heard of -,

He nodded quickly. `I know what has happened.'

She gripped the bars that separated them and asked earnestly, `What sin have I committed to deserve such a fate?' It was an honest question, and she expected him to have the answer.

He thought about it for a long while, embarrassed by her faith but not wanting to disappoint her. `My dear lady,' he said gently, `we do not always deserve the cruelty of our fellow man.'

`Do you mean to say I do not suffer God's judgment? May I still go and sit at his right hand?'

`I'm afraid only you can answer that.'

`I have tried to lead a good life,' said Rebecca. `I have attended church services regularly. And yet, sometimes in these past months, I have questioned God. Oh, Doctor, I know I must die and I am not afraid of it, but I could not bear to know that I have failed his test. And what of Francis and my dear children? How grievous it would be for them if I were to leave the family name blackened:

`It might not come to that,' said the Doctor. He had wanted to bring her solace, but the words hung between them like accusations. Liar. Fraud. The nineteenth of July. he thought, and wished he could not remember the date. A Tuesday, less than three weeks distant. Five women in a cart on Prison

Lane, still in chains. A last taste of sweet air on the short journey to Gallows Hill. A bloodthirsty crowd around the sturdy oak tree. A rope around Rebecca Nurses neck. She would not know freedom again. This prison - this damp, cold, vermin-infested hell - was the rest of her life.

They say witches cannot shed tears, Doctor, yet I have shed enough this past week to bring an end to the drought.' It was not fair.

'I know that dear Francis prepares an appeal against my sentence, but I dare not hope for its success.'

He had to do something.

'It is best I accept my fate.'

Something.

'No,' said the Doctor. 'Your appeal will succeed. And if it does not, why, then we shall just have to think of something else, shan't we? Don't give up the fight, Rebecca. Don't ever give up fighting - and I will see you free of this place,! give you my word on it.'

And it would have been so easy to do it, too. But as Rebecca was taken from him, a heavy weight settled upon the Doctor's shoulders. He had been impulsive. Stupid, even. He could not do what he had promised He must not, though every instinct of his being protested that he should. Life was not fair. Time was not fair. It occurred to him that this was how Susan felt.

He felt wretched

Susan ran. though she did not know to where She couldn't go back to the Ship: it was too far and she felt too weak. She couldn't go back to the tavern: Barbara might be there and she needed so much to be alone.

How could they carry on as if the world wasn't falling apart As if everything still made sense?

She had not reached the parsonage door. She could not hear to see Parris and to hear his words of condemnation, his unshakable convictions being trapped in her head, waging war on her beliefs. She had torn away from Mary, with her prophecies of damnation and theories of the occult being drip-drip-dripped into her mind until she didn't know what was real and what fantasy. She wanted to escape her own thoughts, memories, nightmares, in the same way. So Susan ran, with neither aim nor reason. As if she could outrun her own confusion and hurt. As if the world might leave her alone. And, when it did not, she found a fence to cry behind instead.

And there, at last, the Doctor found her.

Ian rode on horseback behind Francis, clinging to the older man's waist and mentally reappraising the benefits of travelling on foot. But his discomfort was forgotten at the sight and sounds of a commotion ahead. The constables, it seemed, had made an arrest. But their prisoner was resisting them. Only as they parted for a second did Ian recognise the screaming, spitting bundle of fury in their midst as Candy, the witches' leader from the forest. And, in that instant, she saw him too.

Somehow, Candy broke free of her would-be captors and hurtled towards Ian. venom in her eyes. She was yelling something, but her voice was hoarse and he couldn't make out the words. He didn't have to. to understand his peril. He scrambled to get off the horse, feeling too exposed and vulnerable upon it. His leg caught on a saddlebag and he tumbled straight into Candy's reach. She flailed wildly, tearing at his skin and his hair, swearing at him all the while. He fought a defensive battle, trying to push her away - until, to his relief, the constables caught up with her and reasserted their authority.

The black woman screamed as she was borne down beneath the weight of five muscular men. Even as he wiped blood from his cheek, supported by a concerned Francis, Ian winced to see Candy's head being driven painfully into the ground. Still, her eyes were fixed upon him hatefully, and she roared her threats. `You were warned, Goodman. You were told what would befall you if you breathed a word of what you saw. You are cursed now. The Devil won't forget!' It seemed pointless for Ian to protest that he had had no part in her arrest. She was, after all, being taken to a probable death. Still, as Candy was dragged away, her words collapsing into sobs, he couldn't help but feel a deep chill across his shoulders. A saying from his own time occurred to him: There, but for the grace of God,

But God, he knew, had nothing to do with any of this Abigail identified her attacker. I tell you There is no doubt: And yet, Mr Parris, you rely once more upon spectral evidence.'

`I witnessed her torment, Mr Mather. I saw with my own eyes what Susan Chesterton did to my beloved niece, and I could do naught but stand by helpless. God demands that justice be done!'

The discussion drifted towards the finer points of New England law, and Abigail could not understand much of it. She was not helped by the fact that words were lost through the thick oak door of her uncles study, nor by her own reluctance to climb the stairs beyond their turning point lest someone emerge from that door. The soft-spoken reasoning of Cotton Mather. a high-ranking Boston clergyman who had taken an interest in Salem's troubles, was especially hard to discern. And it was that which concerned her the most. Parris, she knew, was on her side - and the third member of the gathering, Chief-Justice Stoughton, had seen the girls' fits often enough to believe in their occult causes. But Mather was an unknown quantity, and his calls for physical proof of the witches' guilt might see an unfortunate end to this business yet.

`I would proceed with care in the matter of accusing a child,' said Cotton Mather. `The Warren girl, I recall, was once also thought to have signed her name to the Devil's book.' Stoughton reacted defensively to this slight on his court. `She was indeed seized by evil, Mr Mather, and we did right to confront and expel it. Through our prompt actions, Mary Warren was saved and she now sides with the angels.' Beside which,' said Parris,'a tender age does not preclude the possibility of sin. Nobody doubts the guilt of Dorcas Good.' Mather sighed. `A tragic case indeed. And vet, tis true that the craft may pass from mother to daughter:

`Or from father, said Parris. Thomas Putnam and I have borne witness to the heresies and disrespect of Goodman Chesterton. He once told me. in as many words, that he follows the teachings of a false bible. I believe, in this case, that the father is responsible for the ill deeds of the daughter; that Susan might even be saved, if we were to excise this malefic influence from her life.'

`And yet we have no direct proof against the father,' Cotton Mather reminded him.

`He involves himself with the supporters of Rebecca Nurse. If he were to be arrested, it would hinder their attempts to undermine the court's authority, and this can only prove good for the community.' Parris knew what he was saying. Stoughton would be easily tempted to his side by such a prospect.

Mather, however, still thought overmuch. `I would speak to the child now, ere we make a decision.'

Abigail scurried downstairs, her movements covered by the scraping of chairs from above. By the time the grim trio arrived at the kitchen door, she was busily scrubbing the floor. She pretended not to see them at first, then scrambled to her feet and gave an apologetic curtsy. Parris rewarded her diligence with a tiny smile, and told her she may rest a while now as a colleague would have words with her.

Mather spoke to Abigail kindly and bade her perch on a high stool. He had a round, gentle face, but it was hardened by an alert intelligence that could prove her dangerous. 'Abigail,' he said, 'I do not seek to add to your burdens, but it is urgent you tell me what occurred here last night. Can you do that?'

She nodded dumbly and collected her words, squirming inwardly beneath his gaze. 'Oh sir, 'twas awful. Susan's spirit came into this very room, and with the minister present too. It knows no shame. It slapped my face and pinched my arms and legs. It bit my hand. Look, the marks are still fresh.' She proffered her right hand for inspection. Stoughton gasped at the small circle of tooth marks in her flesh. Parris said nothing, though he had not seen them before. Nor did Mather give a reaction, much as she looked for one.

Why would Susan do such a thing to you, Abigail?'

She said... she knew that Mary had told me.'

'Told you of what?'

'That Susan had attacked her also, but two nights since.'

'You did not speak of this to me!' cried Parris.

'It is true, I swear it. Ask her. Ask Mary. Susan put her on her broomstick and carried her to the witches' church, behind this very building. She bade her drink the Devil's blood and hurt her grievously, but Mary resisted as we all must resist these demons.' She broke into tears. 'Mary told me what had happened and I should have told you, Uncle, I know I should, but I was afraid. Susan came to me, as to Mary. She said that, if I was to tell on her, her father would be displeased and he would punish me unto death.'

Mather was suddenly interested. 'Her father, you say?' Abigail resisted the urge to smile. She had hooked him. She looked directly into her interrogator's eyes and said,

Yes, sir. He was here too, standing by the window over there, in the very spot that the minister stands now, laughing as his apprentice turned her magics upon me. Oh, please do not condemn Susan, sir, for she is bedeviled as was Mary herself once. As once were we all, when the Devil made us to do his work in the forest.'

'You say that Susan's father controls her?' said Parris eagerly.

Goodman Chesterton is a warlock, sir. And, unless he be clapped in irons, then surely he will kill me for revealing it.'

'Don't expect me to wait on you two every time we visit Earth's past,' said Barbara good-humouredly as she laid pewter plates in front of the Doctor and Ian before sitting down to her own meal. 'It's taken me all afternoon to prepare that salad, what with going into town for the ingredients and finding water to wash them in.'

Ian grinned. 'Two and a half centuries before women's lib, eh?'

'The important thing,' said the Doctor, munching on a spoonful of lettuce, 'is that you threw off suspicion. It is vitally important that we appear to be a normal family.'

'Which means fewer meals bought in the bar downstairs and more prepared for us by our little woman here.'

'Oh, you male chauvinist, Ian Chesterton!'

'Just applying the standards of the time,' said Ian cheekily.

'I think it's a bit late to worry about appearing normal though, Doctor,' said Barbara seriously, 'I mean. no one said anything today - there were no more incidents, thank goodness - but I heard a lot of whispering behind my back'

'So long as it goes no further,' said Ian

Quite,' agreed the Doctor. 'However. I think we should be

aiming to leave as soon as possible, if only for the sake of Susan's health.'

Yes, what is wrong with Susan?' asked Ian. She was asleep in the other room: the one they had booked in Ian and Barbara's name, though in practice Barbara shared it with the girl.

'It's to do with her telepathy, isn't it, Doctor?' Barbara recalled their adventure with the Sensorites, in which Susan had demonstrated unsuspected mental abilities. She didn't like to think about it. It had been a rare reminder that, despite outward appearances, the Doctor and his granddaughter were not human. She didn't know what they were,

'Indeed.' The Doctor steepled his fingers together and rested his head against their tips. After a moment's cogitation, he began to explain. 'I'm afraid I should have anticipated this. My granddaughter is still at a vulnerable stage. These powers of hers are developing, but she lacks the maturity to handle them. We are in the midst of an outbreak of hysteria and her mind is being bombarded by strong, forceful emotions and images. She is sharing in the delusions of the victims; in some cases, even feeding them.'

'With some sort of... psychic feedback, you mean?'

'That's right, Chesterton, that's right. She and this friend of hers, this Mary Warren, even shared a nightmare.'

Poor Susan,' said Ian. 'It must have been terrifying.'

Can you help her?' asked Barbara.

'I have placed her in a mild trance: installed some blocks in her mind. She is sleeping peacefully for now. But we must return her to the Ship. She is ill-equipped to survive here for too long.'

Do we leave tonight?

`I wish we could, my dear. I wish we could. But to reach the forest, we would have to pass through a packed bar downstairs - and certain people might be suspicious if we were to try another moonlight flit. No. I think the early hours of tomorrow will be safer.'

There's one problem, said Ian. `I made a promise to Francis.'

The Doctor looked immediately suspicious. `Francis Nurse?'

`Yes. I told him I'd go with him to Boston, to present our appeal to the Governor. We're leaving tomorrow morning and probably won't be back till Monday night.'

`It will do your cause no good, my boy. No good at all.'

`But it can't do any harm, can it? And I made him a promise.'

Barbara watched the Doctor's reaction closely. He did not seem pleased at this turn of events. `We could take Susan back to the Ship and wait for Ian there,' she suggested. 'She'd be more willing to go if she knew that something was being done about Rebecca.'

`And who knows?' said Ian. `We might change history after all. We have some pretty convincing evidence on our side. Francis and I even talked to the foreman of Rebecca's jury today, and he's promised to make a statement that as good as says he gave the wrong verdict.'

The Doctor's eyes were hooded, his thoughts his own, but he nodded slowly, 'Very well, my boy, very well. I agree to your plan - but for one small detail. I would be happier if you could remain with Susan. She might have need of your strength if your flight from here does not go undetected.'

Then what about Francis?

The Doctor took a deep breath, and every nerve along Barbara's spine tingled. He was about to make an announcement of some import - the result of a long-considered decision. `I will ride to Boston with Francis myself. I will help your friends to present this appeal of yours. And I will do whatever it takes to ensure that Rebecca Nurse receives her pardon.'

3 July 1692

Irregular streams of people converged on the meeting-house and formed a loose-knit group at its door. Ian eyed them suspiciously as he cut across the flow. He had thought the witch trials finished for now, and such a flurry of activity was otherwise unusual at this hour of the morning. He headed for the tavern, on the far side of the road, and ascended its stairs in deep thought. He shook his head ruefully as he reached a surprisingly obvious conclusion.

'It's Sunday,' he announced to Barbara and Susan as he entered their room. 'Everybody's going to church.'

'That should make it easier to slip away, shouldn't it?'

Susan was brighter and happier than she had seemed in days - thanks to the Doctor's ministrations, presumably. Not at the moment, no. There are too many people out there. If we leave the tavern now but turn away from the meetinghouse, they're bound to see us and wonder what were up to. Even if we wait till the service starts, there's still the watchtower.'

It's the worst possible time to go. isn't it?' said Barbara. 'We'll draw attention whatever we do.'

'We could just wait here and keep our heads down.' said Susan.

Barbara shook her head. 'No, what if we're missed at the service? What if somebody comes for us? They take their prayers seriously here. If we're absent from church without a good reason, we could be arrested on the spot and flogged.'

'Charming,' said Ian.

They all considered the situation for a minute, before Barbara asked, 'Did the Doctor get off all right?'

Ian nodded. 'No problems there. I don't suppose Francis is too worried about missing church.'

'It's probably why he chose this morning to leave,' said Barbara. 'An act of defiance against Parris. Anyway, the main thing is that the Doctor's out of the way, and he won't be coming back to the village. Whatever we do, it can't rebound on him.'

'No. We just need to reach the TARDIS and wait for him. Without being followed, this time.' They had been lucky to shake off Parris's tenacious pursuit during their first flight. 'We don't want a ring of militiamen around the Ship when the Doctor returns

I don't we have a choice, then' said Barbara. 'I think we must go to church',

'I suppose you're right.' Ian didn't relish the idea of spending any more time here than he had to. The Doctor had warned him that Susans condition might deteriorate and he couldn't cope without the old man if that happened. Afterwards said Barbara, people will be leaving for all areas of the village. We can just drift along with them. Someone like Parris would be hard-pressed to keep tabs on us: Then we can make a run for the forest when nobody's looking,' Ian concluded. 'It sounds like we have a plan.' 'I just hope Grandfather can do something,' said Susan quietly.

An air of foreboding settled over Barbara as soon as she entered the meetinghouse. Dozens of eyes were turned upon her party; real or imagined, she did not know. She concentrated on observing what the other arrivals were doing. A cultural faux pas now would only add to the feeling against them.

She had not been in this building before. In truth, it was barely more than a hut, and there was scant room for all who wanted to worship. The galleries were packed and, on

this level, rows of people were crushed together in high-sided pews. She was dismayed to find, first of all, that men and women were separated. Ian shrugged and cast her a forlorn glance as he found a seat on the right-hand side of the room. Barbara was pushed along with the flow towards the left, and was alarmed to see that she had lost Susan also. The village's youngsters, it seemed, were made to stand at the back. Resisting the incessant pushes of those around her, she struggled to catch a glimpse of her companion. She was rewarded by the discovery that Susan, at least, was not alone. She had found her friend. Man Warren.

Feeling exposed, vulnerable and a long way from the door. Barbara took her seat and noticed, to her chagrin, that she was immediately behind Ann Putnam and her husband. She resolved to ignore them, playing with her hands and studying her own interlaced fingers. She was uncomfortably aware that Ann had spotted her. The woman muttered something in Thomas's ear and shot the newcomer a hateful glare, but said nothing.

The meetinghouse was filled to capacity, but still villagers teemed through its doors. The air was hot and still, suffocating. Susan longed to be far from here. The memory of Sarah Good's trial, between these walls, and the presence of a subdued Mary by her side churned up too many unbearable emotions. A tingling sensation crept across the back of her skull and she fought to control it, using the relaxation techniques that her grandfather had taught her. She still wanted to save the people of Salem. She still had hope that Rebecca would survive her ordeal, even against the will of time. But, more than anything, she wanted an end to this. She wanted to leave.

'I will pray for you today,' whispered Mary. Susan smiled weakly.

The Reverend Parris cleared his throat for attention. He led his congregation in prayer and Susan joined the others in repeating each line after him. She had attended religious ceremonies before, on several worlds, but this one was

different At most - and especially at the best of them - she had found herself bolstered by the joy and love of the worshippers, even though she had not shared their faith. No such emotions were created here The Puritan' litany was long and turgid. and even Parris made little attempt to inject it with feeling. The responses were given by rote, almost reluctantly. This was no pleasure - rather, a duty. The service dragged on. Susan could not see Barbara from where she stood, but she drew regular concerned looks from Ian. She returned them confidently, although the pain in her head was beginning to grow and spread again. She closed her eyes and rubbed her temples. With the villagers' chants merging into a lulling background drone, she felt herself drifting into dreams. She thought of the TARDIS. Of home. Then something sharp dug into her side, between two ribs. She stifled a yell as she was yanked back to dour reality. The man with the stick had already passed her by and was prodding some other poor child into wakefulness.

Susan's legs ached.

Parris announced that they were to sing a psalm.

Barbara stood awkwardly and realised, with some discomfort, that she was expected to know the words to the hymn. Sung with neither heart nor musical accompaniment, it came out as a dirge. The slow and tiring melody would not have been pleasant. even had the voices of the congregation not slaughtered it. She kept her lips moving but allowed no sound to pass through them. There were more prayers then, and more hymns. Time dragged on interminably and she estimated that at least two hours had passed since they had arrived. Her face smarted with prickly heat and she was bothered by circling mosquitoes, several of which had slipped into the building from the nearby swamp. Whenever she was called upon to stand, she felt nauseous She wondered how Susan must be coping: what if her illness resurfaced? She remembered restless children, fidgeting through school assembly, and thought this must be a thousand times worse for the

children here. Would this meeting never end?

They sat again, and Barbara experienced blessed relief as she realised that the praying and singing was over for a time. Parris was delivering his sermon, and she had only to listen. She failed in this regard, unable to concentrate on his words. He referred to the witch trials - of this she was dimly aware - and for the most part he seemed to be preaching about the deserved punishment of those who would consort with the Devil. She was forced to pay attention when he talked of the efforts of some to overturn 'a fair decision of God's own court'. These 'misguided sinners', he said, sought to desecrate even the holy day by so working against him when they should be in meeting. Francis Nurse's challenge to the court's authority was clearly a sore point with Samuel Parris. He spoke of it at great length and with scorn. He was scared, Barbara thought, and she found herself wondering if the efforts of Ian and the Doctor might bear fruit after all

'you have no business in this house of god' hissed Ann Putnam. Turning only partway towards Barbara and speaking out of the side of her mouth Barbara sighed and chose not to answer. It had been only a matter of time, she supposed. before the woman felt compelled to express her disapproval I have watched you, You know not even the words to your psalms.'

Barbara bridled and broke her vow of patience. Leaning forward, she whispered harshly in Ann's ear, 'I have as much right to be here as you, with your nasty, suspicious little mind.'

Ann would surely have said more, but a gasp rose from the rearmost section of the congregation. Something was happening at the doors, but, no matter how both Barbara and Ann strained, they could not see what. Belatedly Barbara realised that Parris's sermon might provide a clue. He was still discussing 'those who would see witches walk free amongst us', but with a peculiar emphasis now on the church's duty to show its intolerance of such evil; 'to act as

God would direct us, with neither question nor hesitation'.
`Bring the witch forward!' the minister commanded - and suddenly, Barbara knew just who had been brought into the meetinghouse.

Rebecca Nurse had been unable to attend church meetings for too long. When last she had seen this house, it had been furnished as her courtroom. Now, as she was led down its aisle, she allowed herself to believe that, in this place of all places, God may witness her plight and smile upon her. It was a vain hope, she scolded herself. She was not here to receive mercy. Chains still bound her, limiting her strides.

Firm hands held her arms and kept her on course. All eyes were upon her, and she averted her own gaze lest she witness too much hatred. She felt nothing. Her emotions were numbed by so many acts of cruelty. Whatever was planned for her today, it would be but one more. The minister, perhaps, would want to hold her up to further ridicule, to show his community the evil against which they fought. If so, then she would show only dignity and composure. She would give them no reason to believe his words. No cause to harm more innocents.

She was brought to a halt before Parris, who had already launched into a tirade. He reminded his congregation of the accusations against her; of the hearing that had proved them to be true. He spoke of Satan's conceit, to disguise his minion as a good churchwoman. And he said more, though Rebecca could not hear all his words. Such a traitor, Parris concluded, had no place within this holy institution.

And that was when, at last, Rebecca understood.

She might have realised it sooner, had it not seemed inconceivable. She had been unable to imagine a worse fate than she had already suffered: imprisonment, torture, deprivation, disgrace, the suffering of friends and family. She had had but one source of solace, and this she had thought eternal. She was a member of the church. She believed. And,

while she believed, there was hope.

Now hope was dead. The minister was pronouncing a sentence of excommunication upon her: a banishment from God's church and sure condemnation to Hell. He was stripping away the one thing that Rebecca had left. The one thing she had clung to. Destroying her more completely than the hangman's noose could have imagined. There was nothing in life or death for her now. No place in Heaven. Rebecca Nurse fell to her knees and wept.

And Susan could stand it no longer
How could they treat an aged woman this way' Could they not see how weak, how ill, she was? Had they not done enough to her already? Fury burnt in her heart, pounded in her brain, and she had pushed her way to the aisle before Mary could stop her. 'Leave her alone!' she screamed, but followed the command with a choking sob. Instinct told her to race to the altar, to wrest Rebecca from the uncouth, unfeeling hands of her guards. Fear halted her; reason kicked in a second later. An alarm bell was ringing inside her head and the room tunnelled around her. Momentarily. She was on the outside of her body, looking down at its small, trembling shape, surrounded but alone, and screaming what have I done?

Her rash words seemed to echo, to merge with the appalled mumblings of the congregation, to turn themselves back upon her as if to say, You stupid child, you were almost free! She wanted Ian or Barbara or her grandfather. but could see only the faces of strangers, leering, condemning her. And Parris, pushing Rebecca Nurse out of his way in his haste to see who had disrupted the ceremony His nostrils flared in outrage; his face was crimson.

She backed towards the door, wrestling with the familiar imperative to turn and flee. She has done nothing wrong, can't you see that?' Her voice was tiny. What was she doing? Trying to salvage the situation, but knowing it was

hopeless. 'Can't any of you see what's happening here?

You're so obsessed with your witches that you see them wherever you look. You're letting fear blind you. It could be you next time, any one of you'

'Constables,' bellowed Parris. 'arrest that girl'

The constables had to push past the minister to obey. Susan had a second's grace to survey the crowd, looking for understanding. She found none. She saw Ian's face, a mask of horror - too far, too hampered, to reach her. She could not see Barbara.

Alone again. Too much for her to handle. She reacted as she always did, cursing her weakness. Why couldn't she stand up to them? Why couldn't she be more like Grandfather? How long would she remain a helpless, frightened little girl? Hands tore at her dress as she ran for the doors, but momentum carried her through. She erupted into the outside air; hot and stale as the relentless sun approached its zenith. She ran, with only one objective in mind. The TARDIS.

Susan's departure caused an uproar in the meetinghouse. Villagers commented loudly upon her scandalous behaviour. Some demanded action. Some voices, Barbara heard gratefully, were raised in her defence. The constables tried to reach the door, but too many people had left their seats and it was near impossible to move. Ann Putnam

shouted something at Barbara, but she did not hear it. She launched herself into the mêlée in the hope of escaping the confounded woman and her damaging accusations. She was pushed and pulled and squashed and trampled. The exit seemed a mile away.

An age later, she spilled out on to the road but found the noise and confusion there almost as bad. She could see no sign of either Ian or Susan. Nor had Parris been able to

extricate himself from his flock yet. But Thomas Putnam was present, and had the attention of most.

'We have allowed this wicked child to live amongst us far too long,' he preached. 'She does challenge the authority of our leaders and scorn the teachings of the Holy Bible. It is only through the wiles of her family that she has thus far escaped retribution.'

The crowd roared its agreement. Barbara froze indecisively. They were paying her no attention, but that could easily change. If she spoke up against Putnam now, she would surely doom herself. And yet, if she did not, what peril might Susan find herself in?

Then it was too late.

In her time, they would have called it a lynch mob.

Thomas Putnam set out in search of his victim, and entreated those who shared his sentiments to join him. Many did. Too many. They were joined by a stream of girls, Abigail Williams at their head, transparently overjoyed at the prospect of the hunt. And Barbara could only hope that her companion had found Ian or the TARDIS, or both. For the dam of reason had burst in Salem Village this day - and if Susan was seen here again, then nothing would keep her from being swept away by a tide of suspicion and loathing and fear.

Susan pushed herself further. faster, barely aware of the grass rolling beneath her feet She had to get away, had to run faster than she had run before. But her body betrayed her. She hit a slope awkwardly and her right ankle twisted beneath her. She cried out. more in frustration than in pain, as she collapsed. She didn't know where she was, but it didn't matter. So long as she kept moving. She dragged herself up. breath catching. She could not see anybody, but she felt them. Their hatred was a blunt axe, smashed into her brain. Psychic feedback. Coming closer. Her thoughts

were jumbled, hectic, some not even her own (such fear, how could they stand to live with it?). She was in a nondescript field. Which way to the forest? She chose at random. Keep moving, don't let them catch you.

Grandfather, where are you?

She had made a mistake. She didn't realise it until, through streaming tears, she saw the girls moving to cut her off. Abigail. Mary. The younger Ann Putnam. She knew the other faces, if not their names. She should have doubled back, but she could hear adult voices too. And feel their proximity. Perhaps she was surrounded. Perhaps not. In her headlong dash, she could not pause to check. But, as if through a haze, she saw the bridge. The bridge across the brook. The wrong side of the village. But Susan could only think of the sanctuary of the Nurse homestead beyond. Perhaps the Doctor was still there, or Francis. An illogical hope. But her pursuers could not have reached the far bank yet. Escape lay in that direction.

She swerved towards the bridge. Abigail and her followers moved to cut her off. Their paths converged Susan was closer. But her ankle throbbed, making her favour her left side. She was slowed. It proved to be her downfall.

Abigail cannoned into her. Determination had imbued her with remarkable strength. They hit the ground together and almost rolled into the water. The younger girl came out on top. Susan was on her back, Abigail straddling her chest and fighting to keep that position. Susan latched on to her long blonde braid and Abigail squealed as she tugged it. Long nails dug into Susan's wrist as Abigail tried to break her grip.

Susan managed to raise a knee, to dislodge her attacker from atop her, but by now each had a firm hold on the other. And Abigail's followers had arrived, forming a circle around them, cheering and shouting encouragement as the wrestling match continued. Susan caught the back of a hand across her face; responded with the heel of her palm to

Abigail's chin. The girl was pained, and lashed out blindly Susan managed to extricate herself, to push Abigail away from her. She swayed, unsteady on her feet, and prepared for another bout. But Abigail remained on her knees. She wiped her face on the back of her sleeve. Her nose was bleeding, but her expression was that of a victor. She had done all she had intended to do.

Susan could not reach the bridge now. She was surrounded by jeering, chanting children. And swarming across the field from the direction of the crossroads came a hungry mob of villagers. She was trapped.

Thomas Putnam arrived first, pushing through the youngsters until he was face to face with his prey, though he spared a glance for poor, dishevelled, injured Abigail. 'See what the witch has done to me', the girl moaned, 'She is angry that I would act against her'

'Aye,' cried Ann Putnam Junior, we all saw what she did.'

A spectre flew out from her. contested another witness. It swore it would kill dear Abi

It assailed her with punches and kicks and bites

No protested Susan. for all the good it would do. 'That isn't what happened More adults were arriving now the youngsters parting to allow them into the centre - apart from the usual afflicted girls, that was. They huddled together by Putnams side. Susan felt a charge building in the atmosphere. Her skin tingled. Once again, the scene took on an air of unreality. Her mind threatened to drift off into illusion. She forced herself to concentrate.

The girls fell into fits again. Abigail went first, kicking up dust from the dry earth. Ann next, with a dreadful wail: 'It comes again, it hurts us. We are caught betwixt her spirit and the blistering fires of her domain. Oh God, have mercy!'

The adults looked to Putnam for guidance, but he seemed lost. To Susan's surprise, Mary pushed her way forward. 'No, Abigail, Ann, you must not do this.' But more girls followed Abigail's lead with each second. 'Do not believe in them. They would see my friend in jail, though she has done no wrong. You must bid them stop.'

But the fits were too convincing. Even Susan could scarcely believe them natural, though she knew their cause. The less wise Thomas Putnam simply shook his head. 'How can this be a deception?'

She is taken by the Devil again. Thomas,' another of the adults shouted.' 'Tis clear he speaks through her mouth. Susan's familiar sits on Mary's shoulder,' wailed Ann

A yellow bird it is,' cried Abigail. It pecks at Mary's tongue and makes her to lie.' Susan blinked spots away from her eyes. She could almost see the bird herself. She had to deny it. had to think. This was but a temporary distraction The crowd would be on her in seconds. What could she do'

Putnam seized Mary's arm. 'What say you. child~ Do you share this girl's beliefs? Have you, that were so recently saved, turned back to the path of sin?'

Mary tried to stammer something, but the onlookers could not have heard. It seemed that everyone had an opinion, and wanted to give it. Cries of 'Witch! and Consorter!' mingled with entreaties to the terrified maidservant to reveal who had corrupted her so.

Mary swallowed visibly, and her eyes met Susan's and held them. She was, by equal turns, encouraged and jeered. She tore her gaze away and nodded, defeated. Her statement was inaudible at first, but with Putnam's encouragement she repeated it, and shouted it: 'She is a witch! A cursed witch!' Howls of anguish. Of satisfaction, more like.

'She has come here to pour scorn upon the works of the

court; to twist our thoughts and to plant doubts so her witch friends may go unmolested. She sought to have me in her power.' Then she was in the grass with the others, howling like a wolf. `No, Susan, why do you do this to me?

`Twas not my fault your deception failed!

Susan felt betrayed, sickened, scared but, most of all, dizzy as the circle closed around her at last. She thought to back away, but realised the futility of it. A desperate plan occurred to her, and she had no time to even think it through. She fumbled in her skirts and produced two things. Elizabeth Proctors doll. And a pin.

This gave the mob pause. and elicited a gasp that was heavy with righteous horror - as if they were shocked to have their suspicions confirmed, despite their willingness to act on such. The sharp point of the pin poised next to the dolls head. Susan issued her threat. Her mouth was dry and the words reverberated dully in her brain.' If any of you lays a hand on me. Ill run this pin through the doll's head. I swear it. And my victim will be... She cast about for somebody suitable, and saw Thomas Putnam glaring knives of hatred at her. `Him!' she concluded, with a nod in the appropriate direction. `I... I'll kill him!' It seemed to be working. Putnam was positively ashen.

`Now, I want to get out of here.' Susan motioned towards a section of the crowd, but nobody moved. `I said, I want to leave!'But still, her demand earned no reaction beyond the shuffling of feet and a few uncomfortable glances. Even the hysterical girls had ceased their commotion, and a deathly hush had fallen. Nobody dared to accost this self-confessed witch, but they would not so turn against God as to aid her escape. An impasse had been reached, and Susan knew she would lose their fear if she did not act.

So she made a second rash decision.

`This is your problem, all of you. You're scared of things

that don't exist.' She tried to sound like her grandfather: a lecture from him would always command respect and stir reason. Instead, she felt like a petulant, immature girl railing against the world. 'I'm no witch. How could I be? There's no such thing as magic - and I'll prove it to you'.

She rammed the needle home through the effigy's head
And made sure that everyone saw it.

To her horror, Putnam screeched and threw his hands to his face, as if his head had exploded. He collapsed like a dead weight and, almost alone, the crowd surged away from his attacker. Ann Putnam junior burst into tears and flinched from her father's felled body. But he was struggling to his feet again already, and his face - twisted gruesomely by pain and rage - was one of the most frightening things that Susan had ever seen.

Witch" he yelled.

He was twice the weight of Abigail, and he bore her down easily. She did not have time to react. The doll was wrenched from her grasp, the pin removed. Putnam tossed it to one side, then punched Susan in the face. It was a strong blow. She felt blood erupting from her nose. Putnam stood back, eyes blazing. And his followers were emboldened by his example now. The crowd leapt upon her. She was dragged to her feet, poked and pinched. Those who still hung back contented themselves with shouting vile insults.

Somebody asked Putnam what to do. It was suggested that Susan be taken to Parris or handed to the militia. But he still wanted vengeance. His lip curled with malice as he proclaimed: 'She denies she is a witch, though we have all seen her cast a witch's spell. Well, there is one sure test of her claim, and we are in the best spot for it.'

Float her!' somebody shouted, and others took up the call.

Float her! Float the witch!

Susan must have blacked out then, such was the pressure upon her mind. She cursed the latent abilities that made her so unremittingly aware of the crowd's feelings, their hateful thoughts, unable to screen them out.

The next moment of which she was clearly aware saw her in the shallow stream. being forced inexorably downward by rough, insistent hands. She offered token, pointless resistance as her head hovered an inch above the surface and the scent of brackish water played with her nostrils. She took a final breath, almost too late, before she was thrust under. Her ears were filled, the cries of the bloodthirsty pack muted. She closed her stinging eyes.

She felt cut off from the world; unbearably frustrated as she realised she might not see it again. Might not see anything. They intended to kill her. She knew this with numbing certainty; could sense it in their thoughts. It was the ultimate test of a witchcraft suspect: if she survived her ordeal, it could only be by occult means, and they would hang her. They would learn their mistake when she drowned. Too late for Susan. They might show remorse at her death; they might treat others with more reason. She might end the witch-hunt through her sacrifice. The idea might even have comforted her. It did not.

Everything went black. Even the colours behind her eyelids were engulfed by shadow. To her surprise, it did not last. She felt herself lifted. By... hands? No, their hands still

pushed firmly downward. This motion, she sensed, came from within. And then she was standing, her would-be murderers falling away before her, and she faced them: the cowering, wretched primitives, helpless, hopeless, before her revealed power. The power of a witch. And it was hardly a surprise for, after all, the doll had worked against her expectations. She stood there, knee-deep in water, exulting in her new-found self-awareness and status. and

she vowed that they would pay for what they had meant to do to her.

Then she tried to breathe in.

And the illusion snapped like an over tensed elastic band and she was below the water again, her face pressed into the mud, lungs empty and straining and hurting. And even-thing went black for a second and final time. Which was all Susan knew.

`You must not go after them!'

Barbara struggled to remove Mrs Putnam's clinging hands from the fabric of her dress, but the woman was insistent.

`Don't tell me what to do!' she protested.

`You cannot stop them, and they will think the same of you as they do of your daughter.'

Barbara pulled away at last, but she knew that what Ann said was true. Bitter resentment boiled up within her. `What do you care? You think I'm a witch, don't you?'

`You may still be redeemed, if you but confess yourself.'

Barbara almost laughed. She was drained, both physically and emotionally. She had no idea where Susan was now, and could think of no way to help her. She sank into the dirt, leaned against the wooden meetinghouse wall and wondered when this would all end.

To her dismay, Ann crouched beside her But she seemed kinder now, and more understanding. Was this some sort of a trick?

'Sometimes,' she said. 'we may be lured into using a witch's tools for holy reasons.'

'I thought it was sinful.' said Barbara wearily, 'to use black magic for any purpose.'

'Might not God forgive our methods if their object be just?'

'Look. I haven't cast any spells! Will you leave me alone?'

'Have you not been tempted Goodwife Chesterton? To pierce the veil between our world and the next? To contact those who have passed over; to ensure that the ones you love are safe and happy in God's embrace? It might be worth any sin to ease your heart so.'

Ann left those words hanging in the air, and slowly they sank into Barbara's troubled mind. She turned her head slowly, saw Ann Putnam's expression of intense hope and realised what she was being asked.

'Your babies..'

'Those of mine, and of my sister.' The plea was almost voiceless. 'I have tried to contact them, so many times. I have cast the runes, boiled up magic potions, and yet their voices do not come to me but in half-remembered dreams. Can you not help me?'

'I...!' Barbara was lost for words. 'I can't. I'm sorry.'

Ann's face sagged, then hardened. 'You would not use your sorcerous powers for even such a cause as this?'

I don't have any powers!' protested Barbara.'

'You are a witch!'

'it seems to me that you're the one whos practised witchcraft!'

Both women were on their feet now. and Barbara wished she could take her last words back. The wretched Ann had

turned away from her, head bowed, and she was hugging herself tightly. Barbara drew closer, wanting to comfort her. but she felt that to touch her would be a mistake. She hung back awkwardly.

'I miss them so,' wailed Ann, tears flowing freely. 'How can it be right that they have been taken from me? How can it be God's will I am cursed, I tell you. I will know no peace until we have cleansed the evil from our midst.'

'I know: said Barbara softly. 'I know.'

Ian had been teaching for long enough to know when trouble was afoot. A ripple of excitement spread across Salem Village. People streamed towards its centre like eager kids to a playground fight. His every instinct told him Susan was involved. He joined the throng, and soon saw its destination: the massing crowd by the brook. He pushed his way through determinedly. He didn't allow himself time to be horrified by the sight of three men - Thomas Putnam among them - holding Susan face down in the water. He simply reacted. He skidded down the short, dry slope and hit the trio like a bowling ball. They scattered, and Susan bobbed to the surface. Ian took her arms and unceremoniously hauled her out of danger. He dropped her as a brawny arm snaked around his throat from behind. He kicked back against his attacker. but Putnam joined the affray and winded him with a punch to the stomach. He returned the punch and managed to deliver a satisfying uppercut to the man's jaw. He shook himself free of his captor and backed away, eyeing all three men warily as they closed on him again, His breath had been stolen, but he made an effort to speak.

'Is this what the Bible teaches you? To drown innocent children?'

'Your daughter is no innocent.' Snarled Putnam, 'and we seek only to test her.'

With a flash of insight. Ian realised what the nature of

their `test' must have been, One of Francis's friends had talked of the practice of floating. `Well she's passed then, hasn't she?' They faltered, He had gained their attention, `Look at her, man, she's lost consciousness. She's barely alive. Are you going to kill her before you'll accept she's no witch?' He recalled some of the arguments that had been made at the Nurse home, and addressed his audience in their own terms. `The Devil fools you into thinking the guilty innocent, but might he not also do the reverse? That's why we have courts, to find out the truth, If you choose to make your own justice, but fall for his deceptions, then the war is lost.'

He was beginning to sway them. They had only really needed to have someone break their blood-crazed trance, to point out the reality of things. To explain what they had been doing. He wasn't home and safe yet, but he had at least bought time to attend to Susan. He crouched by her side. To his relief, she was breathing shallowly.

Putnam wasn't willing to let this go yet. Ian would have been surprised if he had been. `She used a witch's doll,' he protested. we all bore witness to it.

'She hurt me! squealed Abigail in support.'

'You hunted her down like a dog. Have you ever thought she might just have been frightened?' He checked for a pulse It was weak but steady She would survive.

And what of you Chesterton' Perhaps it is you who seeks to deceive We might learn something indeed if we were to float you.'

Ian stood up slowly to face his tormentor. The crowd were no longer behind Putnam, but they could well have become stirred up again if he was to carry out his threat. However, if Ian was not mistaken, Thomas Putnam was a coward. He would not dare to attack him when not riding on a crest of frenzied approval. The pair glared at each

other for a long moment, each taking the measure of the other.

Their deadlock was broken by an unexpected arrival. Samuel Parris made his way to the front of the crowd, with an unusual calmness. He was flanked by two constables. Ian wondered how much they had seen. `Goodman Chesterton is correct,' said the minister, to his surprise. `It is the job of our court to judge the accused.' He looked sternly at Putnam, who turned away, abashed. `And, in the case of the girl Susan, it is my belief that she is more sinned against than sinning.'

He was up to something. Ian could sense it. He dared not interrupt, though, for at least Susan would be saved from the mob. But Parris's next words confirmed his most awful suspicions: the Devil would take Susan Chesterton as his pawn - and, lacking as she has been in spiritual guidance, she cannot resist his wiles. I intend to take her into my own home, where she can learn the word of God and share in the strength of my niece and of all those beset by this curse.'

`Now hold on a minute!'

`You would deny her God's succour. Ian Chesterton?'

`I...no, I...' No answer would have appeased the onlookers. So Ian fell silent, conceding the point. Things could have been worse. They still could be.

The constables made a move towards him, and he realised then that Parris's final card had yet to be played. `But then, you worship not the God of our people, do you?' A smile flickered about the minister's thin lips as he brandished a sheaf of papers. `That is why, sir, I have sworn out this warrant against you. You are under arrest.'

4 July 1692

Susan woke and, for a second, her mind was empty. She blinked, but still did not recognise the room in which she found herself. Vague memories of drowning came to her. A dull buzz in her head hindered concentration. She felt hollow, as if somebody had scoured the marrow from the insides of her bones. A child stood at the foot of her bed. Her vision was blurry. She remembered a name: Betty Parris. No, Betty had been older. 'Who are you?' she asked.

'Susannah.'

'Where am I, Susannah?'

The girl turned and ran.

Betty's sister, thought Susan. Was she in the parsonage, then~' Why couldn't she remember?

The door opened. This time, it was Samuel Parris who entered.

And flew at her, his face a bloated, twisted mask of malice, reaching out with sharp claws, digging into her flesh,..

She scrambled to get out of bed, was hampered by a crash of nausea and looked up to realise he was simply a man. Parris stood in the doorway, seeming almost sorry to have worried her. What had she been thinking of? He must have rescued her from the pack. He had wrapped her in warm, dry towels: filled her with soup.

'Do you feel better this morning.' he asked kindly. Susan shook her head. 'Do you remember aught of what happened last night?' Logic told her that much of what she did recall had been unreal, vivid though it still seemed. She shook her head again. Parris dared to move closer. He seated himself on the next of the room's four beds, a safe distance

away. Even so, tici skill crept with his proxnnhly. she told herself not to be so stupid. `You were molested by witches: old acquaintances of yours, I do not doubt. They sent their spirits into this room and subjected you to torments most vile.'

`I... don't remember.'

`You suffered a most restless night. The witches have renewed their onslaught upon many of the girls, but they stole your tongue and forbade you to tell of them. Perhaps you recall now who they were?'

`I don't think so, no. I remember having nightmares, but -,

'Take not this matter lightly. Susan The witches know you to be safe in this house of God. and they are dismayed. They will come to you again and wage war upon your soul, unless you resist them.'

`But I don't know anything'

'What price familial loyalty Susan. when your own parents would cause you such pain Speak out against them, and allow God to be your father in their stead:

Her head was spinning 'They wouldn't!'

Ian Chesterton already lies in Salem Prison.'

No'

Parris crossed the gap between them. He held Susan's arms in a firm grip as she trembled and shook her head vigorously. Something dark and awful was rising in her heart: despair given occult form. She tried to dispel it with reason.

`We came here to help you,' she said, `but you're ruining everything!'

`They come to you again, do they not?'

`No. Leave me alone!'

`Who are they, Susan?'

`I don't'

`God will protect you if you but speak the truth. Who are they?'

`No!'

His face distorting, the room itself collapsing, grey formless shapes streaming through tumbling walls. They cackled with malice and licked their lips at the sight of their victim.

`Help me,' Susan begged of Samuel Parris, as the witches attacked.

You've got to do something about Susan,' said Ian. How can I?' asked Barbara. `I've tried to get into the parsonage, but Parris is there all the time. He won't let me near her.'

`Is he hurting her?'

`I don't know.' It was typical of Ian, thought Barbara, to be so concerned about his friends despite his own predicament. `No, I doubt it. He thinks she's a victim, like the Williams girl and Mary. He'll probably treat her quite well.'

So long as she doesn't try to stand up to him.'

`Ian, I don't know what to do. The conditions in this place...

He tried to reach through the bars, but the chain connecting his wrists stopped him. Barbara reached for him

instead, and they held hands tightly. 'Forget me. We're all used to being in places like this. I'll survive. In fact, they'll be taking me back to the village tomorrow, for an examination or something. I'll see you then. In the meantime, see what you can do about Susan.'

She nodded bravely. 'I'll try.'

How are you? They haven't done anything to you, have they?'

Barbara shrugged. It seemed petty to be discussing her own problems, though chief among them was a gnawing sense of despair. She had lain awake all night wondering how this had come to pass; how they could have been so close to freedom only to have the prospect so completely destroyed. She felt as trapped as either Ian or Susan now. But all she said was, 'I've had a few funny looks. Nothing serious.'

Ian nodded. 'Parris and his allies have it in for all of us. You'll be next, and then the Doctor if they can find him.' Of course. He'll be expecting us to be at the TARDIS tonight.'

'You should go to him. With Susan, if you can manage it - but don't take any stupid risks. He'll know what to do.'

'We'll come back for you.'

Ian leaned as close to her as he could manage, and whispered, 'Remember what the Doctor always says. No cell is escape-proof.'

She tried not to show how much she doubted his statement. He had indeed come unscathed through such imprisonment before; they both had. But this time, it felt different. Perhaps it was this dungeon, with its rats and its damp and its cold and fetid air. Or perhaps it was the almost communicable sense of futility that its miserable denizens generated.

Either way, this wasn't a place where hope could thrive.

Susan worked in the pastor's kitchen and longed to make a run for his door, but she was too weak, confused and afraid. She half believed that he was the only man who could care for her. She worked diligently, learning from Abigail how to operate the spinning wheel, how to wind the one-handed clock that would not tick for more than four hours and how to bake bread in the compartment at the back of the enormous fireplace. Parris expressed dismay that she did not know such things already, and was appalled that she could not recite her catechisms. He blamed her parents for not raising her in the service of God and he resolved to deny her food until the demons were starved out of her. Faint from hunger, she sat on the small bed that had once been Betty Parris's, and thumbed unseeingly through a bible from which she was supposed to be learning. Though she had been here only a short time, the hours stretched into eternity and she saw no escape. She cried into her pillow and prayed for (her grandfather? No...) the minister to vanquish the evil forces that were stealing her mind.

Evening was drawing in as Barbara made her third attempt to see Susan. Once again, Parris met her at the door.

`The girl is under my care,' he stated. `She is well.'

`All the same, I would like to see her.'

`God looks after her now, and he would keep her from your malefic influence.'

`How dare you!'

`It is for the girl's own good.'

`How would you know what "good" is? You've persecuted my family since we arrived. You've had Ian sent to prison on trumped-up charges and you've all but kidnapped my daughter. I demand to see her!'

To her relief, Parris stepped aside then. But she was suspicious: he had given in too easily, and with a tight, knowing smile. It didn't matter. She had to see Susan. Parris ushered her through the hall and into the downstairs bed chamber. The presence of another man there - round-faced and lean, with the unchapped complexion of the clerical classes - did nothing to assuage Barbara's worries. 'You know of Mr Mather. of course?' said Parris, and she nodded graciously although the name meant nothing to her. Mather regarded her coolly.

Her heart fluttered in dismay at the sight of her young companion on one of the beds, wrapped into a ball. Susan breathed hoarsely and stared into the distance blankly. She was pale and sweating. 'I thought you were supposed to be looking after her!' Barbara exploded. Parris and Mather exchanged a glance, but said nothing as she rushed forward and took Susan's hand in hers. She could feel only a distant pulse. She rolled the girl over and smoothed back her matted hair. 'Can you hear me, Susan? It's me, Barbara. It's all right now, Susan, I'm here.' Susan muttered something, but she could not catch the words. They sounded nonsensical. 'If she has suffered in this house,' said Parris gravely, 'it is not through the doing of any here. We would only have her go to God and repent of her sins, but certain powers do not wish it.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Rather you should ask the child that.'

'Susan?'

More murmurings, equally incomprehensible.

Parris strode forward and shook Susan roughly by the shoulders. 'Tell them what you have told me,' he directed her.

'Leave her alone. Can't you see she needs rest?'

`Are you so frightened of what she might say, Goodwife?'

`Can't you see what you're doing to her?'

`I? It is not I who bends her mind towards sin.'

`It is meet that we hear what this poor girl would say,' interrupted the calm voice of the man called Mather.

Suddenly, Barbara knew where she had heard his name before. Cotton Mather: he was remembered in the twentieth century for his writings on the witch trials. An influential clergyman, he had given the hunt his blessing; had perhaps even inflamed it. Why did Parris want such a figure to witness this meeting between mother' and daughter'? It could be for no benevolent reason, she concluded.

`The witches hurt me,' moaned Susan. Her eyelids fluttered and her head rolled drowsily on her shoulders. She was barely awake.

Parris leaned over her, unable to suppress his excitement.

`They take their revenge, do they not? They punish you for leaving their fold, for turning to God.'

`It is true.'

`You're putting words into her mouth!'

`Because the witches have stopped her tongue!' retorted Parris fiercely. `But fasting and prayer have so bolstered Susan's spirit that she can lay some charges against them.' He sounded proud of her.

`Who torments you, Susan?' asked Mather.

`Do your parents send their spectres to you?'

'Ian,' pleaded Susan indistinctly.

Mather gave Parris an inquisitive look. `The girl's father,' the minister explained. `Goodman Chesterton.'

`I thought him to be imprisoned?'

`Indeed. But I would wager the girl talks of past mistreatment.'

Barbara had had enough. `This is ridiculous! Susan is obviously ill, yet you bring her here, starve her and try to twist her mind and every word she says. She's calling to Ian for help, can't you see that?'

`We have only her best interests at heart,' insisted Parris. `You havent even called in a doctor!'

Her sickness is of the soul, not of the body.'

`I've had enough of this. I'm taking her away.'

`I would do nothing so foolish, Goodwife Chesterton.'

`You have no right to stop me!'

`You are a witch!' Parris yelled.

Barbara squared up to him, seething with rage but keeping her voice controlled. Oh, and you would just love to think so, wouldn't you, Mr Parris? You'd love to imagine that all your enemies are sinners, or witches, because it means you don't have to be right.' She turned to Mather.

`There are no charges against me, I believe. I can take my own child home with me, yes?' Mather looked once more to Parris, then nodded silently. Barbara smiled and took Susan by the arm.

And Susan screamed and threw off her grasp, and that was when Barbara knew she had been trapped.

Though she had heard much of Salem's hysterical fits, she had not yet witnessed one. But, even if she had, it could scarcely have prepared her for the shock of seeing Susan in the grip of such a violent seizure. The girl tossed her head back so far that the older woman's neck ached in sympathy. It was soul-destroying to see her like this. She beat at her chest as if stifling flames, writhed beneath the punishing blows of invisible bullies and babbled meaningless pleas. Barbara wanted so much to help, but she suspected it was best to stay clear until the fit subsided. A second later, her choice in the matter was curtailed. As one, Parris and Mather took her by the shoulders and hoisted her away from their young charge.

`Keep away from me!' Susan cried to an unseen enemy.

`Go to God, Susan,' Mather implored her. `Go to God. He will give you the strength to resist your attackers and name them.'

`Does your mother torment you?' Parris wanted to know.
`Does Barbara Chesterton cause these ills?' Susan was straining to speak, but something prevented her.

`If you tell us who does these things, we can stop them.'

`She will join your father in his dungeon. You need not fear them once they are bound by iron. Go to God, Susan.'

`He will protect you.'

`It is Barbara!' screamed Susan. `Barbara, why do you keep doing this to me? I thought we were friends!' With this startling confession released, the fit was broken. Her contortions ceased, although she panted heavily and whimpered as if still in pain.

Parris and Mather turned to their visitor. The minister feigned surprised outrage, but could not keep the satisfaction from his voice. `And so, at last, we have our proof.'

`You call that proof? You made Susan say those things!'

`It was not I who sent my spirit to menace her.'

Barbara wanted to argue, but she could already see the futility of it. She couldn't afford to be detained. Who would meet the Doctor then? How would he know what had happened to his companions? She ran instead, out of the room and through the small hallway. She fumbled with the catch on the door and, even as she pulled it open and crossed the threshold, Parris caught up with her. They described a circle as he pulled at her dress and she strained to escape his grasp. 'Where will you run to, Goodwife Chesterton?' he sneered.

~'You've no right to do this!' she protested.

`It will take but an hour to swear out a warrant against you, and you will go to the witches' jail.'

`Take your hands off me!

`Go on, run. Run to your master. See what good it does you.' With a ripping of fabric, Barbara pulled away. Parris yelled after her, `Your family are finished in this colon~~ Barbara Chesterton. Your natures stand revealed now, and we will not suffer any one of you to live!'

Barbara didn't look back. A sob caught in her throat as she p thought of Ian and Susan, both confined to their own prisons. She ran for the forest, for the safety of the TARDIS, for the wisdom of the Doctor - and she didn't care who followed her.

Which turned out to be a mistake.

Susan sat on the side of her bed, running bare feet over the floorboards. She was weak and empty and hungry, but washed with relief all the same. She had learned how to

construct psychic defences. She knew her own mind again. Other thoughts were still there, trying to break down the barriers, and there were black patches in her memory (she remembered seeing Barbara, but not what she had said, nor where her erstwhile teacher might be now). But for the present, at least, her identity was whole. Unassailable. The worst of it was over.

And she understood now. Some of it, at least. A clear head at the end of the ordeal allowed her to see how the sick girls could easily have mistaken hallucination for fact; how the beliefs of Thomas Putnam, telepathically reinforced by Susan's own fears, could have caused a hysterical reaction to a supposed witch spell. How the Devil had been raised in Massachusetts, and why the people of Salem Village had been so extreme in their reactions to him.

Mary had come down from Proctor's home to see her; a friend once more. Susan's conversion to the ranks of the afflicted seemed to have erased all doubts she had had. She had spoken of her own experiences, and Susan was comforted by the knowledge that she was not alone. In turn, she was careful to speak of the fits as a purely medical condition. She met with reticence at first, but it crumbled with surprising speed.

'I'm just saying, she explained gently, 'that we shouldn't automatically believe what we see in these dreams.'
Mary nodded and glanced towards the door conspiratorially. 'Sometimes they are contradictory.'
Susan nodded vigorously. 'That's right. They don't make sense. But people like Parris and Mather are believing every word we say, and acting upon them. You've got to see how dangerous it is.'

'I do, Susan. I do understand.'

She felt a thrill of excitement. To have broken through Mary's wall of resistance so easily: it seemed incredible, after so many fruitless attempts. 'Then you must speak up, she

said eagerly. If you can come forward and tell them you don't believe in the dreams any more... You can tell them you were mistaken about John Proctor!

`No!' She was taken aback by Mary's sudden reversal. `No, you must not ask this of me. Please do not,' Mary stood and deliberately turned away. She hugged herself and stared out of the dirty window, at the hulking shape of the parsonage's lean-to dairy beyond.

`I don't understand.' Susan padded across the cold boards to her side. `What is it, Mary? Why can't you just tell them?'

`I simply could not. I could not face such pain a second time.' Susan felt sad to see tears straining to seep out of Mary's eyes. And it was not just her own sadness, but also the resonance of a deep empathy with her young friend. She knew Mary's misery as her own: consuming, all-pervading, destructive, hopeless. She was drawn by it, a moth to the flame, compelled to touch although it might destroy her. She reached out a hand and, sensing their newly forged link, Mary did likewise. Their fingers touched. A spark crackled between them.

And Susan knew then what it was like to live Mary Warren's life.

Dusk was turning into night. The forest was dark, but Parris was sure-footed and confident, fears pushed to the back of his mind. The presence of the elder Ann Putnam helped. She had arrived at his home, manic with excitement, insisting he accompany her. Her husband's brother had followed Barbara Chesterton into the heathen domain. And, like Parris before him, he had made a discovery. A temple of evil. Parris felt a not unwelcome surge of nervous anticipation. The Lord had blessed his endeavours of late; rewarded his minister for his faith. He had been allowed to triumph over the Chestertons, and now their foul master himself was on the run. He even felt~ optimistic about Rebecca's appeal. He had sent a rider to Boston this

morning, to inform Governor Phips that the girls' fits had been renewed by the mere prospect.

A crowd had already started to gather at the temple. Putnam family and friends all. They kept a wary distance, though it posed no visible threat. It stood beneath the spreading branches of a young oak tree, and Parris was at first disappointed by its innocuous nature. It was made of simple wood, with glass panels at the top of each face. It could have been a local hut, but for its unusual blue coloration and the nonsensical words that had been painted upon it. But, even as he began to doubt this form, God sent him an intangible sign. Parris knew with certainty that the box's appearance was merely a ruse. He felt, though he did not see, the eldritch energy that crackled about it.

'You see?' crowed Mrs Putnam. 'You see, Mr Parris? Our brother has tracked the Devil to his very stronghold; found the base from which he launches his assault upon us.'

Parris stepped forward, entranced, and the hushed crowd deferred to him. A stronghold? A temple? He wasn't sure. But this was a discovery indeed: at the least, a tool from the pits of Hell. They were looking to him to pass judgment, to tell them what to do next, how to employ this divine providence against their foes. But he could not guide them. The irony was a bitter one. Long had Parris dreamed of such an opportunity to prove his goodness, to stand firm in the war against Satan. To make them grateful for him. Now, though, his throat was dry and he dared not make a decision lest it be the wrong one. If only the news had come to him an hour earlier: had Cotton Mather not already left for Boston, then this responsibility would have been his.

Thomas Putnam was quick to offer advice. 'We cannot suffer this thing so close to our homes. What of the children? It should burn.'

'May we not learn something of it first? We could perhaps even turn it against its master.'

`The witch-woman Chesterton is in that temple. Edward saw John Smith at the door and he beckoned her within. They plot our destruction even now, as we ponder. We must needs act fast.'

`Two people stand within? How could such a thing be?

`Tis scarcely large enough to hold one.'

`Who knows what magic the Devil would employ?

Destroy the temple and the magic will die too. God would wish it.'

`Would he wish us to execute them without trial?'

This pair have proven themselves to be servants of evil! He was right, and Parris knew it. So did their audience, who shuffled restlessly and longed (he could sense it) to put the torch to their Heaven-sent find. But to actually do the deed, to kill them...

`Could it be but a doorway?' he asked thoughtfully. It was a comforting theory, and he longed for it to be true. Did he want so much to take Putnam's advice? To destroy it without killing?

His ally knew the right words to say. `If it be so, then through this doorway comes the evil that besets us. It must be burnt if our colony is to know peace. We must trap the demons in their lair.'

A comforting theory.

Samuel Parris had just lived through the most gruelling six months of his life. A portal had been opened to the Devil in his own village, his home, and prayers and sermons and trials had failed to close it. Now this was his chance. To end the madness, to strike a resounding blow in the war. To earn God's favour. To go down in history for all the right reasons.

One chance to live for ever. So how could he fail to take it?

The minister's thoughtful expression filled the scanner screen. Barbara had listened to his conversation - thanks to the Doctor's repairs, the screen's erratic audio circuits were functioning again - and her dread had mounted throughout. She mentally willed Parris to reject Putnam's plan. The Doctor had told her often enough that the TARDIS was virtually indestructible, but that word 'virtually' bothered her. As did the Doctor. He stared at the screen, grim-faced, his knuckles white as he gripped the side of the console. They had spoken little. She had told him briefly of Ian and Susan's plight, but had not asked about his trip to Boston. Nor had he issued any of his usual recriminations when it became clear that she had been followed. This situation was too serious for words.

They watched and waited and hoped.

* * *

Susan pulled away from Mary, overwhelmed. The pain, the misery, the guilt, the intense terror. To live a lifetime like that. So much hurt, so much mistreatment. She had seen herself from the outside, imploring Mary to end the lies. And don't you think I want to, but how can I? She had stood up once before. denounced her friends, recanted her own accusations. They had chained her, imprisoned her, heat her, tortured her, whatever they had to do to make her tell their truth. And I don't know what truth is any more. And Susan was alone in the centre of the witch-hunt, a tiny voice crying out Stop! but it wasn't her voice. It was Mary's, and nobody wanted to hear it. So what can I do? How does it end? No answer to that.

Susan stared into Mary Warren's haunted eyes and understood.

She didn't know what to say, but it hardly mattered. Her friend had seen into her mind too. She knew that Susan was

no witch now. She knew exactly what she was, and although she might not be able to comprehend it, she could have no doubts. A visitor from elsewhere. A stranger who wanted to help. A way out of here. Perhaps the only way, for her.

Susan couldn't stop the witch-hunt, couldn't save those lives, but perhaps she could rescue one tortured soul. 'Come with me,' she whispered, hardly daring to give voice to the words. And Mary Warren nodded, though she too was unable to speak for tears.

No further words were needed. Susan and Mary slipped out of the parsonage hand in hand.

* * *

They were collecting sticks, laying them around the blue box. Building a fire with which to burn the demons out. When Barbara could bear it no longer, she turned to the Doctor in frustration. What are you going to do?

He was standing, head bowed, lips pursed, thinking unpleasant thoughts, fingers tapping idly against the console. He said nothing.

'Will the TARDIS burn, Doctor?'

'No. It won't.'

'That's something, I suppose.'

He punctured her relief with a sharp look, suddenly animated. 'Something? Something? My dear woman, this is a disastrous turn of events. Disastrous! We are about to give these primitives proof that magic exists. Proof, don't you see? Within hours, word will have spread right across New England that the wood of this, this "unholy temple" will not burn. Powerful people - literate people - will come here to see. They will study my ship, attempt to fathom its

construction and consign their findings to print. History will be irrevocably changed and we will be responsible!' `But,' she protested feebly, `we can't change history. You told us!'

He turned away quickly and began to pace the room, playing with his hands and mumbling. `The First Law... chaos in the time stream.., but how can I leave her?' She didn't catch the rest of it. She had scarcely seen him so anxious, so uncertain of himself.

`Burn, house of the Devil!' commanded a muted voice. Startled, the Doctor jerked around to face the screen. It showed Thomas Putnam. He was brandishing a flaming torch. He thrust it into the pile of dry tinder and, within seconds, grey smoke began to obscure their view of the cheering spectators. The TARDIS was ablaze. No, not the TARDIS; merely the wood around it. Barbara could feel no rise in temperature. But the Doctor's reaction was worrying enough.

He was operating the controls, so careful to avoid her gaze that she knew he must be up to something. It took her a moment to work out what. Her heart leapt into her mouth. She raced around the console and tore him away from the switches. `Doctor, no! We can't leave Ian and Susan here!'

`We have no choice, he insisted, his expression pained.

`We can't go out there, Barbara. They'd kill us.'

`Then we stay inside. We're in no danger.'

`We are in more danger than you can imagine,' stormed the Doctor. `Do you think I would abandon my own grandchild if I had a choice in the matter? Well, do you?' She did not. She faltered and slackened her grip, allowing him to pull away from her. `I know it is difficult, Barbara,' he continued, more gently. `The chains of time can bite cruelly indeed. But there is no alternative, believe me.'

She did. He was staring her straight in the eye now, showing no sign of obfuscation, of hesitation. He seemed distant, alien, but utterly resolved. She protested anyway.

'There has to be something we can do. What about the people out there? What will they think when we fade away before their eyes?'

'It will leave them with no doubt that witchcraft exists. It might delay the dawning of reason, the end of the hunt. It might cause the deaths of dozens more. It could be ruinous.'

Then how..

We leave now, Barbara. We take off while the flames burn. It will seem as if the fire has claimed us, and we will leave no physical evidence to the contrary.'

Tongues of flame licked about the TARDIS now, and the screen offered no view of anything beyond. Despite the regulated climate within the Ship, Barbara felt hot and dry. The Doctor turned back to the controls and she wanted so desperately to stop him again. She wanted his argument not to make sense. She wanted not to believe him.

Susan knew that something was desperately wrong. She and Mary were not the only people headed into the forest and, though they had been spotted several times, not a word had been said to them. She gathered speed, dragging her companion along beside her, fearful of what might be luring the villagers here. In confirmation of her worst suspicions, the TARDIS lay at the centre of their interest. A crowd had gathered about it, obscuring her view of the Ship completely. But she could see a rolling black plume of smoke, and its acrid smell stung her throat and coaxed tears from her eyes even before she could accept the awful truth it betrayed.

They were burning it. Destroying her home.

She could not stop herself. Though the odds were against her, she rushed forward and screamed defiance. She had to stop them. But they were too many for her and she found herself held fast and delivered back into the hands of the Reverend Parris. He frowned his disapproval, but she could not hear his scolding words over the crackling of fire and the excited shouts of the mob.

And a new sound: a terrible creaking, like the death throes of an animated wooden creature. A familiar sound. The shouts turned to horrified gasps.

The blue box was disappearing from within the flames. The villagers drew back as one, awe-struck by the disintegration of this magical artefact. As it faded into nothing, and no plague appeared to strike them down, a few raised a ragged cheer. The Devil's temple, somebody claimed, had been razed. They would not see its like in this colony again. But Susan knew the truth, though it was almost as dreadful to contemplate. The TARDIS had dematerialised. Faced with possible death, her grandfather had chosen to flee. To leave her behind.

She wept bitterly and shrank against Parris's side, for he was the only man who could keep her safe now. She stared into the flames, burning lower and wider as the bonfire collapsed in on itself in the absence of its centrepiece. And she saw only a bleak, empty fate for herself. Alone. Abandoned. Damned.

Susan had looked into Mary Warren's past, and she recognised it now as her own future.

PART FOUR

THE WEIGHT OF HISTORY

The Longest Time

A fire burns in the small of Ian Chesterton's back. Flames of agony roar along his spine, tickling the base of his skull, numbed only by familiarity. His chest aches and his breathing is shallow. He cannot move. Chains bind his neck to his feet, his ankles to the wall. He is forced into a tight foetal position, feeling as though he will never be able to straighten his body again. His nose is bleeding. He is fatigued and dizzy, hut too uncomfortable to sleep. He tries to clear his mind, to focus through it, with limited success. He can barely remember a time when he wasn't confined to this dungeon. How long has it been? Days, weeks. months? He doesn't know. His bed in the TARDIS seems a long time distant; his lab at Coal Hill School like a scene from somebody else's memory. His life has become a monotonous stretch of darkness, pain and hopelessness. He has begun to share in the beliefs of his disconsolate cellmates: that this is all he is to know. For the rest of his life. They will kill him, and he will be helpless to stop them. He will die two hundred and fifty years before his own birth. It all ends here.

On the day of his examination, Ian still had hope. He had spent only two nights in prison. He was tired and dirty, but it would not distract him. He was an enlightened man of the future, possessed of the knowledge and the logic to make the judges see their mistake. How could they think him a warlock? How could they even believe in the existence of such a thing? But, as the cart returned him to Salem Village, onlookers lined his path sporadically to jeer and spit at him. Projectiles were hurled: sticks, stones, whatever was at hand. He had done them no wrong, but the force of their hatred was powerful indeed. He felt ashamed. How much worse, he thought, for those to whom these tormentors had

been kindred, perhaps once friends?

The meetinghouse was as full as it had been for the service, perhaps more so. Ian had to push his way through the people who blocked its aisle. He kept one step ahead of his guards, determined to retain his dignity. He was aware that, with his unusual height for this time and the tales that had been told of him, he cut an intimidating figure. In this supposedly holy place, he was greeted only by an awe-struck silence. He halted before the head table, behind which sat three magistrates. Two were local men: he recognised Jonathan Corwin, the sheriff's uncle. The third was Stoughton. He returned the thin-faced Chief-Justice's glare evenly. He was 'privileged', as one jailer had put it, to have such a man preside over his initial hearing. Stoughton was taking a personal interest in Ian's fate.

The Reverend Parris was also present. He opened proceedings with a prayer. He entreated God to grant the judges wisdom, that they might see the witches among them and be not blinded by Satan's lies. He prayed that the negro woman Candy would be granted forgiveness. She had been examined the previous day and had admitted to her sins; had even practised her dark craft for the courts benefit. Parris asked that others might be guided towards the same light and, though he did not mention Ian by name, his gaze lingered long and hard upon him. He made no appeal to fairness; no acknowledgment of the fact that the prisoner might be innocent.

Ian concentrated on everything that was said, either to or around him. He had psyched himself up to expect a series of devious questions; attempts to confuse him, to make him contradict himself. He was surprised and, in no small measure, angry when, instead, he was subjected to a barrage of unsophisticated accusations.

Have you signed the Devil's book?'

'Why do you hurt the children?'

`Have you made contact with the Devil?'

`Have you signed the Devil's book?'

`Do you send out your spirit to torment them?'

He answered each in the negative, but the questions came faster and more pointedly. The most damning of them were repeated over and over.

`Have you signed the Devil's book?'

`Look, if you'll let me speak -,

`Why do you hurt the children?'

`I don't hurt them, I've told you before!'

`Do you take communion on the Witches' Sabbath?'

`Of course I don't!' This shouted denial had the effect of silencing his interrogators at last. In the ensuing hush, Ian knew he had made a mistake. He had allowed frustration to overwhelm him. It was what they had intended. He had shown himself to be disrespectful of both law and church.

But he had their attention. He forced himself to be calm and reasonable, and continued. `You call this an examination, but you aren't prepared to learn anything. You're not interested in what I have to say. You just want me to confirm what you already believe.'

`We are interested,' said Stoughton in measured tones, `in hearing the truth from your lips.'

`No you aren't. You just want to hear a confession.'

`Then confess to the truth!'

`I am telling you the truth!'

`Your guilt has been confirmed to this court already.'

`By whom?'

`The slave Candy has named you as an accomplice to her sins.'

Ian almost laughed with incredulity. `And you believe her?'

But he saw, from his judges' expressions, that they did. He swallowed drily. Clearly, his fellow prisoner had seized a chance to revenge herself upon the man she held responsible for her plight. The evidence against him was mounting. He had to talk fast. `You said yourself that Candy admitted to being a witch; that she cast spells to prove it. Don't you think she wants to bring down an innocent man with her?'

`She has repented of her sins,' Parris put in.

`So now you'll happily accept all she says?'

`It is from you that we wish to hear it,' snapped Stoughton.

`Must we make the afflicted children to suffer further by bidding them come forward and testify?'

`I think you'd better!'

`Have you made contact with the Devil, Ian Chesterton?'

`Have you signed the Devil's book?'

He has drifted into an unpleasant doze, filled with bitter dreams. They sear his eyeballs and his mind and insist that he awake, to escape them. He complies, but regrets this return to his own waking nightmare. He seeks, belatedly, to recapture the dream state, yearning for the quickening of time it might bring. Time, before he is at least freed from this cruel torture and allowed to lie flat. But time is a nebulous concept when no measure can be applied to it. The passage of the sun brings no structure to the endless,

torch-lit days down here.

`Your home is in Boston, Goodman Chesterton?'

`That's right,' said Ian, recalling an earlier lie.

`Then kindly explain why no minister there has heard your name.'

`No minister could name every member of his church,' he retorted.

'I would consider it a failing of any who could not.'

Jonathan Corwin leaned forward. `Perhaps, sir, the accused might like to clear up this matter by simply telling the court whose church he attends?'

`Well, Goodman Chesterton?'

`I don't see where this is leading,' Ian bluffed. `You know I'm a churchgoer. My whole family went there on Sunday'

`And before that?' Stoughton pronounced each word with the delighted anticipation of a cat about to pounce upon a lame bird.

Ian didn't know how to answer him. Science was his subject, not history. It was Barbara who had invented their cover story, and even she would probably have been confounded by this situation. Whatever statement he could make, Stoughton would be sure to refute it and find proof. He couldn't even come up with a convincing stopgap. And by now, it was academic anyway. The villagers had seen his telling hesitancy and were muttering knowingly The witch had been found out.

`You do not attend meetings at all, do you?' snapped Stoughton, visibly savouring his triumph. `At least, not in God's church.'

`If you will but confess, Corwin said more kindly, 'it will go

well with you at your trial.'

'I keep telling you, there's nothing to confess to. I haven't done anything wrong.'

'Disregard of the Sabbath is a crime in itself,' bellowed Stoughton. 'At the least, it will earn you a spell at the whipping post.'

'I'm not from this colony!' It was another outburst born of desperation. Stoughton shifted in his high-backed chair, relaxing slightly. He no longer thought this a challenge, Ian realised.

'Pray tell,' said the Chief-Justice, an amused eyebrow raised.

'Barbara and I left England in a ship some time ago.' Ian could feel his palms sweating, although he spoke the truth.

'We've been exploring ever since, always on the move, That's why you have no record of us in Boston. We've never lived there.'

Stoughton's eyes narrowed and his lips stretched into a tight, malicious smile. 'Oh, we know all about your ship, Chesterton. We have simply been awaiting your slip in revealing it.'

Ian frowned and thought it best to keep his own counsel, Until he knew what the magistrates had planned.

Fortunately, Stoughton could not wait to apprise him of the details. 'Your own wife and your travelling companion, Doctor John Smith, were seen to enter the Devil's domain last night. They led us to your transport: your gateway to whatever benighted world it is from which you came.'

'That's preposterous!' claimed Ian, but there was a cold space in the pit of his stomach.

`Your blue box has been cleansed by the fire of truth. No trace of it remains on God's pure earth.'

`I don't know what you're talking about,' he said stubbornly, though a dozen questions throbbed in his mind. What had they done to the TARDIS? Burnt it? How could that be possible? He voiced the least incriminating, the most important question: `What happened to Barbara? My wife? What have you done with her?'

`I think we have seen enough,' said Stoughton. His fellow magistrates concurred with solemn nods. `Ian Chesterton, by your own words you have betrayed your nature. I commit you to trial and order that, for the nonce, you be held in chains so your spirit may not wander and cause further grief.'

`What have you done to Barbara?'

`You would do well to consider a confession. There may yet be a place for you in Heaven if you be truly repentant.'
`Answer me, damn you!' screamed Ian as he was dragged away. `I've a right to know what's happened to my own wife!'

The uncertainty is the worst torture of all. He could bear his own mistreatment if he knew his friends were safe. And yet he has had no news of them since Barbara's visit, the day after his arrest. At worst, they have been imprisoned or executed or locked in a cell like this one. Or perhaps they are trapped in this woebegone colony, the TARDIS destroyed. At best, they have rescued Susan but have been unable to help him. Forced into retreat, and with their ship threatened, they have had to leave. To abandon him. He knows he cannot count on their help, nor should he have to. He should be able to free himself. But he cannot. He can do nothing for himself. He can only pray for them.

The first time, Ian fought back.

Chained he might have been, but he still had some room

for manoeuvre and he was a good deal more resilient and energetic than his jailers had expected. He downed one, pinning him to the floor and only then starting to wonder what he would do with him next. But the fights were never even-handed. Another man forced his way into the tiny enclosure and attacked Ian from behind, wrapping fat fingers about his throat and almost choking the life from him. He lashed out blindly with elbows and heels, but the first guard was up again: he delivered a punishing blow to Ian's gut. The time-lost teacher doubled up and took a second punch to the jaw. He lost control of his leg muscles and crumpled, but his assailants were not satisfied. A heavy boot crashed into his ribs, another into his temple. He rolled with the force and lay on his back, groaning as they kicked him again and again. He retreated into a warm, dark place and waited for it to stop. Eventually, it did.

The next day, it started again.

His bearing had marked him out as a target. He had arrived here determined to give them no concessions; to keep his dignity, his self-respect, his confidence. He would not become one of the abject, beaten shells of humanity that littered the cells around him. His jailers had risen to the challenge. As did the jail keeper, who questioned Ian more than once about his background, expressing his frustration at the lack of answers with vicious slaps. His wage, Ian learned, came from a charge levied upon the families of prisoners for their food and lodgings. When there was nothing else to be cheerful about, he became perversely gratified that no such income could be garnered from his estate to pay for his dank, one-man room and for his irregular helpings of bread, grey slops and water.

On the fourth day - or the fifth or sixth, by now he had lost count - two jailers squeezed into his cell and unchained him. His wrists and ankles breathed gratefully, tingling with the forgotten sensation of air upon flesh. Briefly, he hoped there had been a favourable development. It was not to be. He struggled in vain as they surrounded

him, held him down and stripped him of his clothes, caring not if the fabric was torn in the process. They ran coarse hands over his naked body, laughing and discussing their search for a `witch's tit' on which his familiar had suckled. When they found nothing, they threw his filthy clothes back in his face and gave him less than a minute to dress again. Iron bands gripped him anew and his spirit was crushed at last. He felt humiliated, degraded. Defeated. He never fought back again.

In time, they saw him as less of a threat. Ian's newly submissive attitude earned him less frequent beatings, and eventually a transfer. He was moved in with other prisoners, his manacles locked to a metal ring in a musty corner in which green fungus sprouted. By now, he had a cold and had not slept properly in days. His head ached and his face was streaked with dried blood. But in his change of situation he saw hope. There were people here to plot with, to build upon his own ideas. People who would yearn for escape as much as he did. His throat burnt, his mouth was swollen and he wasn't sure he could talk any more. Even so, his heart soared when the huddled mass next to him introduced itself as John Proctor.

John Proctor! Ian may not have had Barbara's knowledge of history but he did know that name, immortalised as it had been by *The Crucible*. Proctor had been a fierce opponent of the witch-hunt. He had also become one of its victims. Like Rebecca Nurse, he had been - was to be - hanged on charges of sorcery. His real crime, of course, had been to speak out. Ian's mind worked furiously and he recalled something Susan had said, in the TARDIS on the way to Bristol. She had called Proctor a cruel man; had spoken of his treatment of his maid, Mary Warren. He could not think about that now. He saw what he needed in this man's eyes, in the grim set of his chiselled features. An indomitable spark, subdued but not extinguished. History was right. John Proctor would fight this, until he could fight no more. But fight it how?

`To escape would bring but more trouble down upon us. We could not clear our names, nor regain our property, in such a way.'

`Who cares about property? We're talking about our lives.'

`We have not yet been tried. To run would be to admit guilt.'

`They'll find us guilty anyway, you know that.'

`They will not execute us, though. They cannot. Not if we appeal to their reason.' It was a sound enough argument - for someone who had not seen the future.

John Proctor had been writing a letter, with paper and quill brought to him by a friend. It implored the upper echelons of the New England ministry to take a personal hand in the trials. Ian helped, but he itched to take more direct action, fearing that this would do no good. He had heard nothing of Rebecca's appeal; only that she still languished here, elsewhere in the labyrinth. Her continuing presence deepened the pall of gloom that hung over the prisoners. If one so conspicuously good as she could not be spared this fate, then what hope for the rest of them? What hope, Ian wondered, for his own attempts to intervene in Salem's politics?

"Tis the girls who should hang,' stated Proctor on more than one occasion. `They whose lies have brought about this misery' Ian dissuaded him from repeating the sentiment in writing. His desire for revenge, however justified, would not be seen as a virtuous quality. Proctor needed to produce not an outpouring of anger, but rather an impassioned yet logical plea to common sense.

`Tell them how Stoughton has decided to accept spectral evidence,' he urged, `that he believes what the girls say without real proof.

And that they dissemble,' said Proctor firmly.

They could dissemble, yes,' said Ian cautiously.

`There is no doubt of it. When my jade first joined the accusers, I was able to thrash the Devil out of her. It is only through my absence that Mary has turned to him once more.'

`It's more complicated than that. The girls are genuinely ill.'

`If indeed it be so, then `tis not through the doing of any one of us here - though if I could have but five minutes with them, they would suffer all the things they have claimed, a'right.'

`We could say they might be lying,' said Ian tactfully, `or they might just be mistaken. The main point is that the court should need more evidence either way.'

Proctor nodded and began to write again. Before long, his craggy face crumpled and he closed a massive fist around the half-completed missive. `Where is the sense in this? The governors have no interest in the pleas of such as~ us.' He hurled the ball of paper at the wall with all the force his chains would allow him to muster.

`You can't just give up,' said Ian. Proctor scowled and turned away from him sulkily. Ian had been waiting for this chance. He battled through the muzziness in his head. He had to sound confident, even enthusiastic. To inspire faith.

`You're probably right about the letter. But there is still one way out of this, John.'

His cellmate laughed bitterly. `You have talked of escape before, friend Ian, and I will give you the same answer.'

`We don't have to lose anything. We can hide out and come forward when the madness is over, when we can get a fair trial. The important thing is to survive until then. To be free.' Proctor was still not stirred, so Ian produced his most persuasive argument. `What about your wife? She's

pregnant, isn't she? How long before the baby comes? Do you want it to be born in this place?'

'I do not wish him to live his life on the run,' grumbled Proctor without turning back, 'to he unable to see his brothers and sisters.'

'Then won't you help me?' urged Ian. 'I want to see my family too, John. I don't know where they are. I don't even know if they're alive. If you won't come with me, then please at least help me to escape!'

His only answer was the dripping of water and the long, pain-racked sigh of another doomed soul.

As the jailer towered over him, Ian pushed himself upward and butted him in the stomach. While he was still too winded to speak, Ian clamped one hand over his mouth, seized his throat with the other and thrust him against the wall. The jailer dropped his pitcher, which spewed its contents over both men. Ian kept up the pressure, squeezing harder and harder. He was dizzy and perspiring, but grateful at least that his deduction had been correct. Only one guard had been spared to water the prisoners. But if he was able to shout for reinforcements, then Ian's efforts would have been for nothing.

It was an ambitious and risky plan, but it was all he had. And it didn't take account of the atrophying effect of his days of inactivity. His whole body shook with the effort of forcing weakened muscles to perform. He could feel his grip loosening, little by little. He could feel his victim fighting back.

He almost wept in frustration as his hold was broken. The wiry man scrambled out of his limited reach and, still panting, opened his mouth to yell for help. Ian fought helplessly against his chains.

And the jailer slumped to the floor as John Proctor

brought the heavy pitcher down on to the back of his skull. Light-headed with relief, Ian closed his eyes and supported himself against the wall. When he looked again, Proctor was laying into the semiconscious guard with fists and feet. His face was a snarling mask of hate. `All right,' Ian insisted, `that's enough. That's enough!'

Proctor eased back, his expression clearing. He rubbed his knuckles ruefully. `We have to be sure he will sleep. I have no wish to see what they will do to you - to both of us now - if this fails.' Ian didn't comment further. He wondered if he had looked so savage, so barbaric, in the moment that he too had had the upper hand and was desperate not to lose it. (He probably had, he concluded.)

Proctor stooped and pulled a collection of keys from the fallen man's belt. He slid them across the floor to his ally, and Ian set to work on finding the one to unlock his manacles. Fortunately the chain between his wrists was not so short as to hinder him. `You'll have to come with me,' he grunted over his shoulder.

`You appear to have left me no choice,' Proctor agreed. Ian freed his hands, but found his feet more difficult as his palms and fingers tingled with the restoration of free-flowing blood. He almost dropped the keys into Proctor's grasp. `Here, you'll have to do this yourself till I get my circulation back. I'll keep watch.'

He was halfway to the open door when he was brought up short, startled, by the appearance of a grey apparition before him. He had long since stopped thinking of most of his fellow prisoners as humans; merely as shapeless mounds. He had had the briefest of exchanges with only a few of them. But one had found the strength to rise, to reach out with a pair of scrawny arms. He wasn't even sure if it was man or woman, the broken remnants of a grimy face peering out from beneath a tattered hood. Its voice was dry and cracked. `Take me with you!'

He flinched from it automatically. `I can't.'

It fell again, with an awful wail. Ian felt as if he had just pushed a dagger into its heart; cut the strings with which it clung to life.

`We must.' John Proctor was free now. He pulled Ian around, seized his shoulders and stared earnestly into his eyes. `I have a wife, a son and daughter elsewhere in this festering hellhole. It is not my intent to leave them.'

`We can't take everybody'

`How, in good conscience, can we deny them their freedom? You know full well to what we would abandon them.'

`We stand a much better chance if the two of us can just sneak out of here,' argued Ian. But that was only part of his reason. A glass jailbreak would constitute a significant violation of history. He could almost hear the Doctor now, disapproving as always. He could not do this: The problem was, he didn't quite understand why. How could it be wrong to save these lives, to end such hardship?

Proctor shook him insistently. `With numbers, we can overcome any foe. Remember, Ian, you could not have come this far but for my assistance. How can you, in turn, refuse help to these poor souls?'

How indeed?

Ian's spine feels as though it might snap. A tiny part of him imagines it would be some comfort if it did, for at least the pressure would end. He tries to sharpen dull thoughts, to keep his brain occupied. He asks himself questions. Did a soft heart doom his escape attempt? What made a denizen of these dungeons run screaming to her jailers? A misguided hope for clemency? Or a more subtle push from history? Protecting its own integrity, as the Doctor had said it would. Will he be allowed to leave this place only if he goes alone? Is he as shackled by the chains of time as by

these iron bands?

Despite an adrenaline boost to his system, the next few minutes passed in a blur. He and Proctor had unchained enough prisoners to put up a fight when the jailers arrived. Some were useful only as distractions, though Proctor contributed far beyond what Ian had expected of a sixty-year-old businessman. The jailers were less skilled in combat than in unchallenged sadism. Even so, Ian was staggered by an onslaught of fists and boots. He took an elbow to his nose and the world exploded into a blood-red haze. Soon, he was no longer thinking about his actions. He was striking out here, avoiding a blow there, wading through an undulating sea of subhuman life until he burst out into the uneven passage outside the cell. It took him a second to realise that freedom beckoned. Proctor was by his side, a stream of blood running down his cheek, eyes wild. Other prisoners fought their way towards the pair. Those jailers who were not down were at least trapped, unable to stop them. People screamed and reached to them through bars as they stumbled towards the rough-hewn steps, unsteady in the hall~light. Their pleas tore Ian's heart, but he could do nothing for them. He had lost his keys in the struggle. Five people in all attained the surface level - another had fallen on the stairs, too weak to climb. There were no jailers left up here. It was almost too easy.

Except that somebody had alerted the town guard. Ian and Proctor led the way out on to the street, and came to a halt as they faced a half-ring of militiamen. For an instant, Ian planned to make a fight of it. But they were outnumbered, even before one of their motley group fell to his knees and begged for mercy. And their captors were armed. The sharp points of two rapier swords converged upon Ian's throat.

For how long did they punish him; bind him neck and heels? He cannot tell. He only knows that he is crippled in both body and spirit. As the jailers remove the extra chains from him, he yields to their every prod and does not

respond to their taunts. He will not be able to muster the will for another escape attempt. He cannot even lie straight, though he has wanted to so badly. Blades of agony slice into his back when he tries.

His one consolation is that he is drifting into sleep now, through exhaustion, despite the questions that reverberate in his mind.

Has he thrown away his one chance of freedom? Is he himself now to become a part of history? Will his name appear in future texts, an unimportant addition to the death toll? Has time abandoned him?

Can Ian Chesterton ever go home again?

Barbara stepped out of the TARDIS, and immediately her heart fell into her stomach at the sight of straight roads and large, brick-built buildings. The Doctor's confidence had been as misplaced as ever. The fast-return switch had failed, bringing them neither to Salem nor to the seventeenth century. Her hopes were dashed and, though she had been half expecting this, Barbara's legs went weak with shock. She leaned against the Ship's wooden exterior and quietly wept.

18 July 1692

Fourteen days. Two weeks, stranded in this primitive village. Susan counted each one, like a prisoner marking off the days of a sentence but without hope of release.

Yesterday, she had heard that Chief-Justice Stoughton had signed five death warrants; condemned five women to execution. Sarah Good was one: the spiteful beggar whose trial she had attended. Rebecca Nurse was another. All their efforts had come to nothing. History continued on its path, and had swept her along with it. She no longer possessed the resolve to rail against what must be. She lay in her borrowed bed and cried, as she did most mornings.

'Susan, you must rise else the minister will scold you.'

Abigail shook her roommate out of a fitful doze. She was right. Though the sun had barely risen, Parris would be down here soon and expecting the children to be about their duties. Susan fought to overcome the sick feeling in her stomach. She climbed out of bed despite the weight of sadness upon her. Abigail helped her to dress in a gown for which Parris had lent her material. Once a hateful foe, the minister's niece had taken on a benevolent guiding role towards the newcomer. It was as if Susan's newly acquired label of witches' victim had to be nurtured. Without Abigail, the desolation of her life would have long since overwhelmed her. She would have eschewed Parris's imposed routine, finding no energy within herself to comply with his demands. And, no doubt, she would have been accordingly punished. Cast in prison as Mary had been, perhaps.

Even so, Susan cooked and cleaned with lifeless eyes - too-accurate windows on the emptiness of her soul. She could not even concentrate on the maintenance of her psychic barriers, the development of which had been one blessing of her time in captivity. She had not suffered a full-blown fit in over a week, even when Abigail had climbed up on to the dinner table and tried to fly through the window,

flapping her arms in vain. John Proctor had taken the blame for that one, despite his distance and imprisonment. Susan could stand outside it all now, recognising the symptoms of hysteria for what they were. She felt only the occasional tug at her thoughts, entreating her to abandon logic and to join in. Sometimes it was even tempting. Samuel Parris - no, this whole society - allowed no outlet for youthful emotions. Only a daily drudge of work and prayer. She longed to cast all that aside, to dance and shout with abandon. She stopped herself only because she knew where it would lead. But Susan could foresee a time when, through sheer desperation, she would allow the barriers to crumble. She would rejoin the ranks of the afflicted girls, willingly and for ever. Parris called Abigail and Susan into his study after lunch. 'I am to take the both of you into Salem Town this evening,' he told them, 'along with those who have been likewise tormented.'

'Oh Uncle, no, not to the witches' jail!'

'Be not afraid, Abigail. They cannot harm you now.'

'I suffer pinches and kicks whenever I approach the cursed place.'

'Then you must be strong,' said Parris firmly. 'Five of our enemies are to hang on the morrow. It is Mr Stoughton's thought that we should confront their brethren with victims of their sorcery tonight.'

'That they may be affrighted to confess?' guessed Abigail.

'Aye, and to name their accomplices still free. It is in the cause of bringing an end to your suffering that we must do this.' Then I will go to God for the courage to do it.'

'And what of you, Susan? You have said not a word.'

'I will do whatever God thinks right,' said Susan timidly.

She had long since learned how to retain Parris's favour.

Still, it was hard to pretend this trip would be an act of mere duty, when a defeated spirit was rising again within her. She wanted to cheer. After all this time, she was to be taken to the one man who could help her. The one man from whom she could obtain guidance and hope.

Susan had asked many times about her would-be parents. She had been appalled to learn that, in her delirium, she had cried Out upon her mother'; relieved that Barbara had disappeared along with the Doctor and his `magic box' thereafter. But her `father' had remained. He was close at hand, but frustratingly too far to reach. Until now.

The Doctor was gone. He had taken with him the core of Susan's life. But Ian was still here, and he alone could make this all right.

The horse maintained a brisk trot, but it was not speedy enough for Barbara. She clung on to the overturned TARDIS and tried to rearrange the straw in the cart to make herself more comfortable. These muddy lanes were interminable, and she ached to reach their destination. She stared at the Doctor's back as he spurred his mount onward, but chose not to distract him with questions. Not yet.

Paramount in her thoughts were Susan and Ian. She hated to imagine what they might be enduring. The Doctor had persisted in reminding her how things could have been much worse. The fast-return switch could indeed have taken them to another century, another world. She had felt relieved - and somewhat stupid - to learn that, in fact, they had arrived in the Bay Colony's affluent capital, Boston, only two weeks after they had left. But still, those missing two weeks worried her, particularly when she heard the news that, in but twenty-four hours, there would be an execution in Salem Town.

And that, she thought, was another thing.

Susan shivered as she descended the stone steps. They

seemed to go on for ever, taking her further and further into the depths of a frigid hell. She felt as though she would never climb them again. She clung on to the fervent hope that Ian could help her. But, if he was held in chains below, then how could he even help himself?

The afflicted girls - seven, all told - were silent. The dark, damp atmosphere of the dungeon suppressed even Abigail and Ann, who had chattered ceaselessly throughout their journey into the town. The latter was accompanied by her mother, who had expressed her determination to rid the colony of its 'unsavoury elements'. Where Ann and Ann Junior went, so too was Thomas Putnam. He joined Parris and Stoughton in the role of chaperone. Or agitator, Susan thought. Even the Putnams' servant, Mercy Lewis, was in attendance. That one household, she had come to realise, enjoyed an inordinate say in the course of events. The three men walked at the back of the motley group, along with the jail keeper. They herded the increasingly reluctant girls ahead of them, cutting off all hope of escape. Susan kept close to Mary Warren, though no words passed between them. They knew each other, appreciated each other's plight, too well.

Susan was terrified of what she might find down here. The procession came to a halt before a large but packed cell. Flickering torchlight illuminated the huddled lumps of bodies on the floor within. Susan strained for a glimpse of Ian's familiar shape, but could not see it. The jail keeper produced a stick and rattled it against the bars.

'Everybody stand!' he commanded. 'Come on, prisoners, on your feet. There are men of God present.'

He unlocked the door and marched into the cell. Parris, Stoughton and Putnam ushered the girls, and the elder Ann Putnam, through after him. Some of the wretches were struggling to rise. The keeper lashed out with his stick, prodding and beating others into alertness. They stood, too, after a fashion. One aged woman stumbled against the wall.

She whimpered as the keeper took her shoulders and hauled her back up. The girls found themselves in a tight cluster at the centre of the room. There was scarcely the space to hold them. Susan shrank from the foul, unwashed bodies of the prisoners, sympathy and disgust mingling in her heart.

With slow and measured paces, Parris strode around each of the snivelling captives, regarding them with unconcealed disdain. 'You know these children,' he said. Susan had the impression that he was performing primarily for Stoughton, who watched silently from the doorway. 'It is they who have suffered your molestations these past months. Gaze upon their faces and tell me they deserve such bedevilment, they that be so young and innocent.'

'We do nothing,' muttered one man, his defeated tone belying his defiant words.

'Still you would deny your sins! Five of your kind are to hang, by God's decree. Might not some of you take this chance to repent? For surely this same fate will await those who do not.'

'I would speak to the children.' Parris turned in surprise as an old and bent woman shuffled forward. She stopped, mere inches away, as the chain that linked her to the wall snapped taut. Susan stifled a gasp as, through the gloom, she recognised Rebecca Nurse. 'I would have them know,' she said, 'that I bear them no malice. Even as I go to my grave, I pray to God to forgive those who have done this unjust thing to me, for they are most sorely misguided.'

'You are a witch, Rebecca Nurse,' yelled Abigail. 'A stinking witch, and I hope you rot in Hell for it!' Susan moved to - to do what? Something, just something - but Mary anticipated her foolishness and pulled her back. Susan bit her lip and choked back words of anger.

'May God grant you wisdom to see past the deceptions of

Satan,' said Rebecca sagely.

Parris interceded. `We will hear no more from you, who will not confess your sins though the gallows await you. My niece is correct: you will burn in Hell, an unrepentant sinner. I only hope your fate will serve to turn others to the path of our Lord.' To Susan's fury, he gave Rebecca a push that sent her sprawling backward. She was caught by a short, stout man with a lined face and sharply defined features. He supported Rebecca and glared hatred at Parris, who rounded on him with evident relish. `And what of you, Burroughs? You had the effrontery to wear a minister's cloth whilst you did consort with Satan. There is a special corner for you in Purgatory if you will not throw yourself upon God's mercy.'

`God will not condone your actions in this,' growled Burroughs

`It is he who guides them!'

`Mr Parris,' shrieked the younger Ann Putnam. `He pinched me. Mr Burroughs pinched me.'

`And I,' cried Mercy Lewis. `He sends out his spectre even now.'

`Jail keeper!' roared Parris.

`He is king of the witches,' wailed Ann. `Even this much iron cannot fully dampen his sorcery.'

`Desist from these actions, Burroughs,' commanded Parris, though there was fear in his voice, `else you will be bound by more chains.'

But Burroughs just stood and shook his head slowly, wearily. Mercy Lewis fell to her knees and Abigail, too, was flinching now from random attacks. One by one, the others succumbed. All except for Susan and Mary, who hugged

each other and tried to close their senses to what was happening. Mary prayed for an end to the madness, and Susan joined in, sending a plea to a God in whom she did not believe.

Because the madness had to end somehow.

Barbara and the Doctor sat on a grass verge, eating cakes that they had purchased in Boston. The light was failing and Barbara was keen to press on to Salem Town. However, the Doctor's argument had been sound: they were on the last leg of their journey now and increasingly more likely to be recognised with each step their horse took. They would do best to arrive by dark and find somewhere to secrete the TARDIS. Safe inside the Ship, they would make plans for the morning. Barbara ached with impatience, but understood the need for caution. Some things, however, she did not understand

'You haven't told me about the appeal yet.' The Doctor raised an eyebrow. For Rebecca Nurse,' she prompted. 'I remember. And it should be evident to you what its outcome was. You do know Rebecca is to be hanged tomorrow, hmm?'

'Of course I do.'

'Then I would rather not discuss it further.'

'Why are you shutting me out like this? What are you hiding?'

'Hiding? Hiding?' His eyes darted towards her, then quickly away. 'My dear young woman, I have more things on my mind than your misguided attempt to change history.'

'My attempt? You were as keen as anyone when you left for Boston.'

'Then perhaps we have all learned a lesson from it, eh?'

Perhaps indeed.' He gazed into the mid-distance reflectively
'What happened, Doctor?'

'Well, what do you think?' he snapped. 'The Governor of the colony refused to grant Rebecca Nurse her reprieve. It was as I expected. You can't simply rewrite the past.'

'Did he give you any reasons?'

The Doctor flapped his hands vaguely and struggled to find words. 'What reason do you need? The fact that Rebecca is to be... that they're going to -well it should tell you all you need to know, shouldn't it? Now I will hear no more on the matter.' He took an overly aggressive bite from his soft cake and lapsed into a sullen silence.

Barbara burned with a familiar resentment. He was lying to her, keeping secrets. He had never been particularly skilled at covering it. But she could not press the point. Not yet. They needed to work together, to rescue their friends from whatever fate Salem had dealt them. They could not afford a rift between them now.

There would be time enough for a reckoning later.

Burroughs had been fitted with new chains and the girls were calm again. But the incident had persuaded Stoughton to change tactics. The accusers were split into smaller groups, each accompanied by an adult. They would confront selected prisoners one by one. Susan and Mary had managed to stay together; they had been assigned to the care of Parris. If Susan felt uncomfortable with his close attention, she was positively nauseous upon hearing they were to see John Proctor.

Proctor lay against the back wall of another of the larger cells. He was sleeping, but Parris shook him out of his doze. At first he was confused and haggard, a ghost of the domineering man who had tried to beat Susan a lifetime ago. But, upon seeing his visitors, he levered himself upward

and his expression darkened. Anger lent him a new vitality and Susan was scared of him all over again.

Come to gloat, have you, Parris?' Proctor sneered. 'Or perhaps you would have these whores invent fresh lies against me?'

'Master!~

'Do not speak to me thus, Mary Warren. I took you into my home when no other would have you, and this is how you repay me.'

"Tis you who choose to afflict the girl with your magics,' snarled Parris. 'She only speaks the truth of it.'

'Truth?' Proctor laughed bitterly. 'When she gave you the truth, you clapped her in chains. It is no wonder she is given to dissemble.'

Parris scowled and pushed Mary towards Proctor. 'Speak to him,' he commanded gruffly.

Mary was on the verge of tears. 'Please, Goodman Proctor, confess to these crimes. They will not believe you if you say you do not commit them. They will send you to your death.'

'Confess for the sake of the children, Proctor!'

'Tell them the truth, Mary,' John Proctor implored. 'I know what they have done to you, but it is God who will judge all in the end. It is to him that you must answer. Do you hear me, child?'

'I...'

Mary's voice deserted her. She turned away from him and sobbed. She tried to leave, but Parris caught her and turned her back. Under Proctor's challenging gaze, she composed herself. Her eyes were downcast as she whispered, 'I must tell the truth, sir. You have sent out your spirit to torment me and the others, many times.'

`You see?' crowed Parris. `You will not turn your accusers from God. Now what say you, Proctor? Will you go to him instead? If one such as you can confess, `twill be for the good of all.'

`It will assist you in the persecution of others, is what you mean: Proctor turned his attention to Susan suspiciously. She felt a chill of guilt and foreboding, and hugged herself unhappily. She had hoped to keep out of this. `And what business has she here? Not long since, you believed her to be a servant of the Devil - yet now you would accept her words against me too?'

`Susan was under a malign influence, but she has cast off that shade through work and prayer. She wishes to be let be by your kind.'

`She is a heathen child!' Proctor spat.

`Susan, tell him how the witches afflict you.'

It was an order, not a request. Susan answered in a small voice, rushing her words. Like Mary she avoided Proctor's eyes. `They come to me as spirits and pinch and scratch me and goad me into fits.'

`Have you ever counted John Proctor amongst them?'

She didn't answer. Parris asked again, more forcefully this time.

`Speak truthfully, Susan,' coaxed Mary, eyes begging her to do the opposite. `God will protect you.'

Hating herself for it, Susan squeaked: `Yes. Yes, I have.'

She had wanted to stand up to Parris, to deny his dangerous claim. She could not. She found herself, instead, staring earnestly at the victim of her accusation. She bent

her will towards a silent plea that he would understand; that he would see what she had not, when first she had learned of Mary's role in this tragedy. They were mere girls, and powerless. They had no choice but to do as Parris bade them or suffer the consequences. He knew of Mary's ordeal. He knew this wasn't her fault. It wasn't Susah's fault. Surely he would understand.

John Proctor let out an outraged roar and launched himself at her. His powerful hands closed about her throat. Parris came to her rescue, wrenching him away. The two men grappled and Susan screamed.

'I will choke the truth out of you, witch bitch!' threatened Proctor. Parris was fighting to hold him back; shouting for a jailer.

'Susan? Susan!'

'Ian!' It seemed unreal, but suddenly he was there. All this time, he had been dozing by Proctor's side, and yet she had not seen him. Just another misshapen bundle of rags. He looked awful: bruised and tired, sick and dirty. But he could help her. He had to. 'Ian,' she cried, two weeks' worth of hurt and despair tumbling out at once, 'the Doctor's gone. He and Barbara left in the TARDIS. We're stranded and I'm living with the minister. They make me cry out on people and, oh Ian, they're going to hang Rebecca. Ian!'

She screamed this last, reaching out to touch him as a jailer pulled her away. Another lent his fists to Parris's struggle against Proctor. A third was pushing a bewildered Ian back into his corner. She was lost amid a flurry of activity. 'Susan, hold on,' Ian cried as they were torn apart. 'I'll find a way out of here. I'll do something, I swear.' But the whole prison was alive now, awakened by the disturbance. She could no longer hear his words above the clamour; no longer see him through the mêlée and the blinding tears in her eyes. She could only ask herself what he - her last hope - could possibly do.

Barbara could not sleep. She perched on her bed, mind heavy with disturbing thoughts. Ian. Susan. The Doctor: the lies he had told, the things he had refused to share with her. An endless succession of broken promises. Vows to take her home.

The book lay open on her lap. She had visited one of the TARDIS's libraries. As always, she had been frustrated by the lack of order to its contents. As always, she had found what she sought under her very nose. It was as if the Ship itself sensed her desires and rearranged its shelves accordingly. The book was about the Salem witch trials. In her own time, 1963, it had yet to be written. She had felt vaguely guilty about opening it. But she had had to know what the Doctor would not tell her.

She had been surprised to find the information there, although she had been searching for it. Details of the statements made by Fisk and Rebecca Nurse; of Francis Nurse's journey to Boston to present them to Governor Phips. Barbara found herself wishing she had read this page earlier. The four travellers had made history. The results of their interference were cast in print for all to see, even if their names were not. What had the book said before their arrival?

She had checked the index, fumblingly, for the name Chesterton. It was not listed. If they failed to rescue Susan - if Ian went to his death - would it magically appear? And she had read of a reprieve granted, her heart gladdened until she had remembered the reality and read on. She had learned how the fits of the afflicted girls were renewed that same day; how a 'Salem gentleman', his name unrecorded, had prevailed upon Phips to reverse his decision. Barbara had stopped reading then. And had started to think disturbing thoughts.

Susan hit her knee as she climbed into the cart on Prison Lane. It was a simple accident. Her mind had been

elsewhere, and even the sharp pain failed to focus it. But Abigail seized the opportunity to claim that the inmates of the witches' dungeon had reached out to perform this petty act of spite. Susan did not argue. She accepted Parris's helping hand and lowered herself into the straw. When asked if she was tormented still, she shook her head. The horses pulled away and the receding prison building was swallowed up by darkness. The girls began to talk again, then. She ignored them. Mary took her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. She barely felt it. She could only think of Ian, more' helpless than she had ever seen him. And her life, stretching out ahead of her. Confined to this place. This life. This hell.

Susan was dead inside. If she had felt hopeless before, then it was a thousand times worse now. For she knew that hope was gone.

19 July 1692

On the last day of her life, Rebecca Nurse felt better than she had felt in months. She was able to stand, despite the jolting of the cart as it was dragged along the pockmarked surface of Prison Lane. She held her head high, savouring her last taste of sweet morning air. The mockery and taunts of the crowd that swarmed after the prisoners transport faded into the background, meaningless to her. They had come not just from Salem but from Boston and Ipswich and Topsfield, to see the five condemned women to their graves. Through fear, she suspected. Relieved, perhaps, to be able to divert suspicion from their own deeds. Each would have to make his own peace with God, someday.

Sarah Good could not be so philosophical. She perched on the back of the cart, straining to break her bonds as she hurled vile insults at her tormentors. Susannah Martin was slumped in a corner, sobbing as she hid from them, ashamed. Rebecca surprised herself with her own contrasting serenity, her calm acceptance. But she had seen things beyond this mortal existence. The events of the previous night were distant in her mind, like fleeing dreams. Perhaps they had been but a vision. Even were it so, she felt blessed. She looked to the hangman's noose for release. A beginning. Soon, she would know peace.

Ian sat up straight, nerves tingling in the high-voltage atmosphere with which Salem Prison was newly charged. Few words were spoken, but even those inmates who had not noticeably stirred in weeks were shifting today. Restless.

Attuned to each whisper, each breath. They had been on edge since the signing of the death warrants had been reported. News of Rebecca's release last night had crackled around the dungeon like wildfire; her return, hours later, had brought a depressed hush. Depressed but expectant. Something was happening. Something to break the monotonous routine. Something bad. They all prayed for a twist of fate, a miracle to save their comrades. All were

silently grateful that they had not been chosen to take that final journey. John Proctor wept, for the first time that Ian had seen.

They waited. Waited for the moment when the first supposed witch was sent to her death. They would know; Ian felt it as a certainty. The exact second. Crying with the resonance of her pain and despair. Looking forward only to a similar fate. For if they could do this to Rebecca Nurse, then who could be safe? Whom would they spare?

Parris trailed a short distance behind the cart, matching its sedate pace, heedless of the excited throng around him. This was a sad day for his church, but a happy one too. His advice had been heeded. Salem was taking the first decisive steps towards ending its problem. The first steps towards reinstating its minister as its undisputed spiritual leader. But Parris could afford to be magnanimous in victory, and he knew the importance of making the right impression. So he concentrated on the sadness and reflected the solemnity of the occasion. There would be time enough for celebration in private.

The cart juddered its way out of the town. It struck Rebecca that she would not see Salem's buildings again. Despite herself, her chest swelled with misery. She tried to dispel it with a deep breath. But she was surrounded by the splendour of God's work, and she could not hold back a tear at the thought that she was viewing it for the final time. The delicately sculpted clouds, drifting on a beautiful deep-blue sky. Gentle fields, their verdant coverings swaying in the breeze. The gurgling North River. Rolling hills, with perfect flowing contours that could never have been carved by man. Rebecca's hopes for something better in the next life seemed futile when she saw the unsurpassable gifts with which she had been blessed in this.

She thought too of those she would leave behind. Francis,

lost without her. He was somewhere in the crowd, unable to reach her. She could not see him, but she felt his presence. Dear Francis. She prayed for him to have faith. They would be reunited yet.

`I saw Susan.'

`I know.' The Doctor squeezed Barbara's arm, trying to reassure her though he shared her worries. He, too, had glimpsed his granddaughter in the crowd. He, too, had read the misery in her face. He, too, had wanted to go to her; take her away from this. They could not. Too many people would recognise them, condemn them, work against them. They would end up sharing their friends' fates, not altering them. `We must stick to the plan we agreed. It is the only way, my dear.'

Barbara nodded bravely. The procession was out of sight now. They had joined its fringes, keeping their heads down and covered, then allowed it to leave them behind. They could still hear the shouts, the whoops of joy, but Prison Lane was deserted. `At least we know she's alive and safe,' said Barbara, `and Ian wasn't... well, you know.'

He did know. He had secretly feared that Ian might have stood by Rebecca's side in the cart, his overlong presence here distorting the time stream. Even so, relief was tinged with bitter regret. The Doctor had been unprepared for the impact of seeing Rebecca Nurse go to her fate. Barbara seemed able to blot it out. He couldn't. He had made her a promise. He had broken it. She had trusted him and he had betrayed that trust. But, shackled as he was, what else could he have done? just his best. Get on with it. Save Susan and Ian and leave here. Shake the dust from his shoes.

`Come on,' he said, leading Barbara back to the witches' jail and trying to clear his mind of distractions. `We have work to do.'

The cart took a sharp left turn and a further fragment of Rebecca's old dread fell back into place. The hill loomed up

ahead and filled her vision, though it was some way distant yet. It was an abomination, a carbuncle upon the Lord's creation. Many souls had fled their mortal husks on that hill. Sinners, thieves, murderers. She felt as if their spirits lingered still. Their banshee wails welcomed the approach of their innocent brethren with malicious glee. Enjoying their moment of vengeance, perhaps. For all her efforts, her good and faithful life, she would be hurled into an unmarked grave in such ignominious company. Bridget Bishop greeted her too, the most recent of those hanged. Rebecca did not know if she had been guilty or not. What did it matter? She had been denied fair treatment all the same. She prayed that the spectacle of her death would give pause for reflection to those who had wished for it. The cart trundled on.

`Witches!' screeched Abigail. `You go to a deserved death!'

`You employed your magics to hurt us,' Mercy Lewis shouted. `Now feel what it is to be hurt in turn!'

`You will enjoy the bitter fruits of your lives' works in Hell!' asserted the younger Ann Putnam.

Many of their words were stolen by the uproar, buried in the fever pitch of the crowd. They only yelled them all the louder, running up to the back wheels of the cart and cavorting almost within reach of their victims. The sight of it sickened Susan. They were sending these women to their deaths. Did they not feel compassion? Could they not at least act with decorum?

But decorum was a foreign concept to these colonists today. They exulted in their own tyranny and cruelty. They enjoyed the antics of their youngsters, treating them as an engaging sideshow. Where Susan had expected reflective silence, she found instead a babble of excitement, an outpouring of venom. The contrasting cries of outrage, expressions of injustice, from such as Francis Nurse had hardly an effect. She had wondered how they could hang

Rebecca: stare right into her pleading eyes and remember her good words and deeds and yet kill her. She had her answer now. She had faced a mob like this before, and knew too well of what evil it was capable. She stayed close to Marys side, the subdued pair drawing small comfort from each other. When Abigail entreated with them to join in the mocking of their foes, they declined.

She remembered that night in the parsonage: the start of it all. The thrill of disobedience, of doing something tangibly wrong. All events since had been but escalations of that single, basic impulse: an impulse hitherto repressed by a puritanical society. The wrongs had become bigger, the thrills (for some) greater. And now they committed the greatest wrong of all.

Things had spiralled too far out of control.

It was one of the most harrowing escapes of Ian's life. Not because of the danger: there were no jailers to be seen. They were doubtless enjoying the mid-morning sun, and the deaths of former charges. Not because of the situation: Barbara's appearance, complete with keys and an assurance that the Doctor and Susan were unharmed, filled him with joy. It was because of his cellmates, as they begged him to save their lives too and he knew he could do no such thing. He tried to harden his heart to their pleas, but he knew their suffering too well. By the time his chains had fallen, he had taken a rash decision. A compromise. He might well regret it, but he felt he had no choice.

He took the keys from Barbara's hand. She looked puzzled and anxious, but she trusted him. `Do you still want to get out of here?' he asked John Proctor in a deathly whisper.

`With all my heart.' Proctor was pale and broken. Today's events had destroyed his spirit. Gone was the resolve to stand and fight. He had seen too clearly the end result of such a course.

The trio stumbled across the cell, Ian and Proctor unsteady on their feet. Ian's fingers and toes prickled with the return of full circulation. He lurched onward, knowing time was short. He ignored the hands that pulled and tore at his ragged clothes, though it crippled him to do so. He forced himself to remember his last bid for freedom. He couldn't stop, couldn't help them. Couldn't afford to attract too much attention. He was saving one person; it would have to be enough. Proctor seemed to accept it too, this time. They had to get out of this place, and this was the only way. Alone.

Until they reached the dank passageway. Then Proctor halted and seized Ian by the arms, his eyes alight with desperation. 'Elizabeth,' he croaked hoarsely. 'My wife. My unborn child. We cannot leave them here to die.'

Ian swallowed drily. Things were becoming complicated again.

At the sound of footsteps, the Doctor shrank behind a freestanding cupboard in the reception area. Somebody was approaching, from within the prison building. He cursed his luck. Barbara would be back at any moment, hopefully with Ian in tow. He had to do something, before the pair of them ran straight into a bunch of jailers.

'Should we not check the dungeons?' a male voice asked.

'Go down there yourself if you wish,' said another. 'The prisoners on this level are restless enough. I have no wish to face a hundred vengeful witches, chained or no.'

The first man seemed to agree. 'The keeper cannot expect us to risk our necks whilst he spends his day at the festivities.'

'Not for what pitiful amount we are paid.'

The Doctor could remain in hiding for no longer; not without tempting discovery or, at best, suspicion when he

did reveal himself. He stepped smartly into view, cleared his throat and looked as if he had been there all along. Only two jailers were present, as he had surmised. They reacted to his appearance with astonishment, but he did not give them time to question it. 'Is security in this establishment always so lax?' he demanded. 'I have been waiting for attention.' They were suitably cowed. They mumbled apologies and played with their hands. 'We do not have the full complement of staff today,' one explained nervously. 'You know of the executions, sir?'

'Of course I do, man,' the Doctor snapped, 'and yet I hear you making plans to shirk your responsibilities. It is not good enough, not good enough at all. No, do not concern yourselves with the dungeons now.' They had jerked into action, heading for the steps. It was the last thing he wanted. 'I have sent a woman down there. Yes, you left a set of keys hanging behind the desk here, where anyone could have walked in off the street and taken them. It is fortunate indeed for all concerned that I happened to have business with one of your prisoners. I shall be reporting this to your superiors.'

'Wh-what is the nature of your business, sir?'

'I beg your pardon?'

The jailer repeated himself, less hesitantly. The Doctor had heard the first time, but was stalling. He had hoped that a confident, aggressive attitude would see him through this unquestioned. Why did he never prepare for these situations? 'What, you dare tell me... I have been kept waiting for... Oh, well, I suppose it is your job to ask these confounded questions. Well done, well done.' He coughed uncertainly, aware of his own tongue stumbling over his words. Brain racing faster than his mouth again. He puffed out his chest and clutched at the edges of his cloak, using body language to restate his authority. 'And, of course, you have a right to know what I am doing in your jail. Indeed. Especially when I have been charged to remove one of your

prisoners from your custody. Ian Chesterton. I have a warrant for his immediate release.' He glared at them both, defying them to challenge him again. To his dismay, they did.

'We may see this document then?'

Time for the third approach. 'What is the meaning of your constant interrogations?' he stormed. 'Do you not know who I am?'

'Yes,' said one of the jailers unexpectedly. Recognition and new respect dawned in his eyes. 'Yes sir, I do. I apologise, I had not seen it till now. You seem somewhat... different from last night. This man,' he informed his colleague, 'is an emissary of Governor Phips himself. We will do all you require of us, sir.'

The Doctor peered suspiciously at the stocky, red-faced man but could not recall meeting him. He had had the good fortune to be mistaken for somebody else, he supposed. It was a stroke of luck on which he intended to capitalise. 'I only require you to sign Goodman Chesterton over to my care. My assistant will bring him here.' Aware of scraping sounds of movement from below, he raised his voice so Barbara would hear him. 'In fact, I believe that is them, on their way now. The three of us shall be out of your hair very shortly.'

Barbara froze on the steps, gripped by uncertainty. 'The Doctor's talking to somebody,' she hissed to Ian. 'It must be a guard.'

'You heard what he said,' Ian whispered back. 'He's telling us it's safe to show ourselves.'

'Two of us, perhaps.' She cast a worried glance back through the gloom, at John and Elizabeth Proctor. Dangerous though their presence was, she was stung by their looks of hopeful expectation. 'He isn't expecting a quartet.'

'We can't abandon them now.'

`What else can we do?'

`Leave this to me,' said Ian decisively. `John, I want you and your wife to stay here until I tell you it's safe. Barbara and I will see what's happening upstairs and come back for you.' John Proctor nodded his understanding. Elizabeth sank gratefully into a sitting position, brushing back black hair to reveal a forehead glistening with sweat. Her pregnancy was beginning to show. Barbara could not help but wonder what effect her recent ordeals may have had upon the unborn child.

Ian moved to take the lead, but Barbara halted him. He smiled ruefully as she gripped his arm and marched him up the remaining steps. The Doctor greeted them with a secret nod of approval. Two jailers were also present; she tried to ignore their inquisitive looks. `Ah, Mrs Wright, I see you have brought the prisoner. You have informed him of the details of his pardon, I assume?'

`I have,' she confirmed, striving to sound confident. What had the guards been told, that the Doctor could now brazenly organise Ian's escape before their eyes? Well, run along then, Chesterton. I will attend to the details here.'

Ian hesitated and looked at the Doctor meaningfully. His demeanour became stern. `You are free to go, my boy.'

`I would like a word with you first, sir. In private.'

The Doctor took a deep breath, nostrils flaring. `I'm sure I have nothing to say to you, Goodman. Now, you have been granted a reprieve. I suggest you take it, with no more of this shilly-shallying.'

Barbara wondered how much the Doctor had deduced about what had happened downstairs. Enough, she suspected. She watched with helpless worry as the two

men squared up to each other, unable to speak freely but saying all they needed to say in their stubborn expressions. The jailers were bemused. How long before they became suspicious? 'I'd like a word,' said Ian through gritted teeth. 'about the conditions in this place. About the people who are left to endure them.'

'Other people are of no concern to you. You have your freedom.'

'My freedom isn't enough.'

'It is all that is on offer.'

'Don't you want to put an end to all this?' Ian was edging his way around the room. The Doctor pivoted to follow him.

It is not as simple as you might like to think.'

Oh, isn't it?' He turned suddenly, launched himself at the nearer of the jailers and floored him with an unexpected punch. 'John!' he yelled. 'Up here, quickly!' And then the second jailer attacked Ian, as the first leapt back to his feet, and the situation descended into chaos.

Running again. Breathless, unthinking, no destination in mind. That was how this mission had begun. When it still was a mission and not just a fight to survive. An ironic symmetry, perhaps. Susan had failed. She had known that for weeks. But she had just been forced to witness the ultimate consequence of that failure. The very thing she had come here to stop. The destruction of hope. The prisoners, driven on by constables and by the taunts of spectators. Made to climb their final ascent, too steep and rocky for their transport. To the top of Gallows Hill. Screamed at, urged to confess to what they had not done. The ladder, placed against a high branch of the oak tree. Its top rung knocking against the bark with a hollow, cracking sound. Snapshot one. The first frozen image, scarred on to Susan's thoughts.

The ladder. The tree. The stomach-hollowing sight of the swaying noose.

Others must have perished first. One, two, perhaps three, before Rebecca Nurse's turn came. But hers was the face that lingered, the one to whom Susan's hiding eyes had been drawn. She stood on the ladder, rope tied around her neck, looking like a ghost already. She made her final address to this world, her resignation a painful contrast to the screeched threats of Sarah Good. Parris entreated her again to confess, to beg for mercy. She~ would not belie herself. She asked God to forgive those who had unjustly condemned her. She prayed for them to know enlightenment and peace. She was finally to know peace herself, she said.

The crowd reacted with insults, rude retorts and gleeful assertions that she was bound for Hell. That was snapshot two. Rebecca's face, the skin stretched thin. Raised to Heaven, with a hint of fear and a world of sadness. The last time that mortal eyes would see that face. Then the executioner pulled on the hood, climbed down the ladder and kicked it away.

And Rebecca Nurse died.

The third, final snapshot. The image that will never drift far from Susan's thoughts. Rebecca's corpse hangs like a dead weight, its hands tied behind its back. Its death rictus is masked, but somehow all the more horrific for it. As though something ghastly were concealed beneath the cloth. She rocks gently in the breeze. When they are sure she is dead, they will cut her down; hurl her into an unmarked pit. The crowd are silent at last, as if guilty, seeing what they have done. They afford their victim a respect in death that was not offered in life. But it is too late now. They have killed her. Time will not turn back.

So Susan ran, before Parris or Abigail or Mary could stop her. She ran, because she could think of nothing else to do

but to obey that primitive, irrational impulse. She ran, although there was nowhere she could possibly run to. For running would not change a thing.

She was still trapped in Salem. The witch-hunt continued. Rebecca Nurse was still dead. Her own life tight as well have ended.

Had Ian had the time, he might have regretted his rash actions. His party outnumbered the guards five to two, but Elizabeth kept clear of the skirmish, while Ian and John Proctor were battling below par. The excitement, fear and urgency of his escape had fooled him into overlooking the price that incarceration had exacted from his body. He lashed out the best he could, but staggered dizzily beneath a hail of blows that he could hardly see. He needed to work through this. He was the group's best hope. He couldn't afford to lose control.

But Ian was down and counting the seconds before consciousness would abandon him. Blood rushed in his ears and he could only berate himself for risking the lives of his friends on his insane plan. He had picked a fight he could not win. A fight against history.

Then the Doctor was helping him to his feet, and he realised he had underestimated the old man. Not for the first time. One jailer was sprawled unconscious across the desk: Ian had visions of the Doctor's cane taking him by surprise. The other man was still struggling, but was firmly pinned to the floor by Proctor and Barbara. Elizabeth cowered in a corner. 'Th-thanks,' stammered Ian.

'Do not thank me, my boy. I only acted to extricate Barbara and myself from the predicament in which your foolishness placed us.'

'Yes. I'm sorry about that.'

'What have I told you about interfering with history?'

`Not much!' Ian snapped.

`I've told you all you need to know,' said the Doctor, `but will you listen to me? Hmm?'

The world was coming back into focus now. Barbara was tying the conscious jailer's hands with a rope. He was already gagged by his own shirt. His colleague would be out for the foreseeable future. Ian turned to the Doctor, suddenly excited. `Doctor, we've done it. Don't you see?

We've won! We can take John and his wife out of here.'

`John Proctor, I presume?' The Doctor's disapproval was clear. Ian nodded eagerly. `We can change the course of history: `It is quite out of the question.'

`But it is possible!'

`We must not,' hissed the Doctor. And he was pleading now, not lecturing. The change struck Ian like a bolt through the heart. Was it another deception? He felt as though they were standing on the threshold of a tragedy. How could that be?

He swallowed, determined not to be so easily cowed. He wanted an explanation at least, before he would leave a friend to die.

`We couldn't take them back now if we wanted to he pointed out, drawing the Doctor to one side and speaking quietly so the Proctors would not hear him. `We'd have to drag them down to the dungeon and chain them up ourselves. We've already altered our past, and look: no disaster!' Barbara interrupted the discussion. `We're finished over there. I think we should get out of this place before anyone else turns up.'

`Well, Doctor?'

The old man's face had rarely been so transparent. His stubborn scowl had melted into indecision. He was giving Ian's plan serious consideration. He was tempted. But something held him back. The fear of who knew what consequences? He didn't seem to have the answers any more. Ian almost felt sorry for him, in his confusion. But perhaps the Doctor was about to learn a valuable lesson. About compassion.

And then Elizabeth cried out, fell heavily back against the wall and slid to the floor. Barbara looked startled, John flew to his wife's side and Ian was numbed to see an expression of relief wash over the Doctor's features. Relief and reinstated confidence.

'It is her belly,' cried Proctor. 'The child!'

'The excitement must have been too much for her,' the Doctor announced. Ian hated him for sounding as triumphant as he did.

'She needs attention. We must have a doctor.'

'She can have all the help she needs,' Ian insisted. 'We just have to get her out of here, back to our... vessel.'

Elizabeth groaned, and John Proctor made a decision. 'We would only slow you down. It was in madness that I thought to escape at all. I know not even to where we could have fled. Were it not that the executions today had left me afeared, I would have seen the nonsense of it. Go, Ian. We shall wait here until the jail keeper returns.'

Ian hesitated, but the Doctor was pulling at his sleeve and he knew that Time had taken a hand. The Proctors were tied to this spot by the unbreakable chains of history. He would not persuade them to leave it. Still, he was reluctant to abandon them. 'Write that letter, John,' he urged as his companions waited at the door, showing their impatience.

`Make as big a fuss as you can. They'll have to listen eventually'

Proctor nodded. `Goodbye, Ian,' he said, calmly.

`Goodbye, John.'

Goodbye, John. Hope you don't mind dying. Never seeing that baby of yours. Becoming a martyr.

And then he was outside, with the Doctor and Barbara, running for the TARDIS, fearing pursuit. One step closer to leaving this world, this year, its people, its places, its tragedies, behind him.

Back on familiar ground.

It should have been a day of triumph.

Abigail sat on her bed, knees drawn up to her chest, and reflected on the hopes she had had for this day. She had anticipated it for so long. The Bishop woman's hanging had been but a test of public opinion. It had served to whet her appetite. She had pushed harder for the remaining witches to meet a similar fate. In return, they had molested her all the more. As her pain had grown, so had her hatred. She had wanted them dead, corpses twitching on the end of a rope. The ultimate punishment for their sins. The ultimate demonstration of Abigail's power in this community.

She had expected it to make her happy. Why did she feel so empty?

Because her future was a void. An endless, black, desolate wasteland. Because she could see no respite from her torments. A never-ending cycle of hurting, accusations and punishment. As much a prisoner of this life as she had been of the one before. A row of hanging witches stretched into infinity, and each one was a dead weight upon Abigail's conscience; a malefic spirit screaming for vengeance in her head.

The egg in the glass had shown her the truth. She was damned. She had damned herself. Now she could only play out her part in history as she waited for the Devil to claim her soul.

Parris brought his horse to a halt and Susan slid out of its saddle behind him. They tied the animal up behind the parsonage and trudged towards the back door without a word being exchanged. Parris had stayed in Salem Town even after the sated crowds had dispersed back to their own homes. He had had the constabulary assist in the search for his charge. Eventually Susan had returned of her own accord.

'I ran because I was scared. Sarah Good's spectre lingered in this world after she was hanged. I feared it might make true her dying threats.'

The lies had tripped easily off her tongue, turning Parris's anger into concern but doing nothing to lessen Susan's despondency. This was her new life - joining the Salem girls in their deceptions, because it was the only way she could know peace. It frightened her to think how well she understood Abigail Williams now. She wondered how long it would be before she too was forced to make a choice. To cry out upon an innocent, to condemn them. Or to suffer herself. The kitchen was empty and in darkness. No fire was lit. Susan could feel Parris stiffening with anger. He had charged Abigail with the duty of preparing supper, yet she had been idle. He drew breath and roared her name. Susan broke away from him, wanting to escape before the inevitable confrontation began. But it was not Abigail's shape that appeared in the doorway into the house. It was a shape that Susan recognised instantly, though for a second she would not let herself believe her mind was not playing tricks on her again.

'Grandfather!' she cried, overjoyed, rushing into his arms. He held her affectionately, just for a second, before bundling her behind him and into Barbara's protection. Abigail and

Mary came into the room too, to watch in nervous silence. Susan hugged Barbara, needing irrationally to have proof of her tangibility. Looking back over her shoulder, she was no less happy to see Ian. He had followed her in from the yard, so he and the Doctor had Parris surrounded. She wept then with the knowledge that her ordeal was over. Her friends - her family - had returned for her. Escape was but a formality.

‘What is the meaning of this intrusion?’ blustered Parris, though his position denied him such authority and he appeared to know it. He produced a wooden cross from his cloak and brandished it. ‘If you have come to end my war with Satan, then mark this: the Bible will always inspire good men to take arms against such as you.’ Ian pounced and snatched the cross from his hand. Parris cringed: a pitiful sight. ‘You’re so sure of yourself~ aren’t you, Parris? So sure the world will come to an end if we don’t all do as you say. Well we aren’t here to hurt you. We just want to take Susan back and leave.’

Parris sneered, emboldened by the lack of an immediate threat. ‘And to where will you travel, Chesterton, know not by what devilry you escaped your jailers, but the good colonists will not allow you to long remain free. You will be hunted down and hanged for what you have done, for today you have only made your guilt the more plain.’

Ian smiled grimly. ‘Believe me, we can be far from this place before you’ve even raised the alarm.’ He produced a length of rope. ‘Now, are you going to let me tie you up or will you make this difficult?’

‘I will not raise a finger to assist a witch.’

Abigail jerked into action, elbowing her way past the Doctor and to Parris’s side. ‘It is as the minister says,’ she crowed defiantly. ‘Mr Mather and Mr Stoughton are expected here in but a moment. They will see what you have done. And the village is awash with people, returned

from the town. You cannot move quickly, unseen.'

'Do as you will,' challenged Parris, 'but know you will be captured and tried for your sins.'

'If we were the witches you think we are,' growled Ian, 'we could kill you to keep you from talking.'

'I would trust in God's grace to protect me from your magics.'

Susan could bear it no longer. With each second, her hopes of leaving this place seemed, to fade. 'We should just make a run for it,' she blurted out.

'Far better to surrender and pray for God's mercy,' preached Parris. 'For all my efforts, the girl is as unrepentant as her witch parents. Do you wish her to hang beside you, Ian Chesterton?'

'You wouldn't!' cried Barbara.

'I'm afraid he would.' The Doctor had been observing the exchange in contemplative silence. Now his commanding voice rang out clearly. 'And he would find it a very easy thing to do. You see, our friend here has become quite skilled at manipulating the victims of this little outbreak.'

'I beg your pardon, sir!'

'Oh yes, whether he knows it or not - and I suspect he does know it, much as he might tell himself otherwise. But what of the Reverend Parris himself, I wonder? How innocent can he be in all this?' The Doctor was smiling, and Susan's nerves unwound at the sight. It was a smile of victory: her grandfather's joy at defeating an enemy with his wits. 'After all, the doorway to the Devil was opened in your own home, was it not?' He put the question sharply to Parris, who reddened. 'And yet how could it have been opened at all, unless the minister himself was weak? Or evil?'

Susan knew what she had to do. 'Oh Grandfather!' she cried, toppling into the centre of the kitchen. Her performance was convincing enough to make Barbara gasp. She was on her knees, twitching and jerking. 'Grandfather, tell Mr Parris not to hurt me.' Parris and Abigail watched in horror. The Doctor's smile grew broader. Susan tossed her head back and moaned in imaginary pain. 'his spectre, his spectre. It comes to me, pinches me, bites me. The king of witches stands revealed and he would take his final revenge.' And what, Mr Parris, will your friends think if they arrive at your home to see that?' At the Doctor's words, Susan rolled on to her side, to conceal a grin. She clutched at her stomach and groaned.

'She dissembles!' cried Abigail. 'It is not my uncle's spectre that bedevils her. It is that of her father, prodding her into this false accusation. Your deception will avail you naught, Chesterton.'

'Oh? Then how do you explain this?' Susan sneaked a quick look and saw that the Doctor had produced a witch's doll, apparently from Parris's pocket. The minister was aghast.

'You placed it there with your own sorcery.'

The Doctor's eyes twinkled. 'I hope your Mr Mather believes you.'

'Mary sees it,' Abigail insisted, a touch of desperation in her voice. 'Mary sees how you seek to besmirch the minister's good name.'

All eyes turned to Mary Warren then. Even Susan forgot to continue her pretence. The young woman blanched from the attention. Then she swallowed and, hugging herself, came forward. And looked at them, one by one. Abigail first, their gazes locking. Then Ian. Barbara. The Doctor. When Susan's turn came, she strained with all her mind to will her friend to her side. It was to no avail. Their bond had been broken. Susan's powers had been dampened, and she would

not have dared release them even had she been able. She sat on the dirty floor and longed for Mary to do the right thing. Wanted it so much it hurt. Mary stared into her eyes the longest. And made her decision.

`The Reverend Parris,' she said, calmly, fixing a confident stare upon the minister, `is a witch. Long has he entreated us to cry out on the innocent, for thus is the Devil's work done.' And there was silence.

Until Parris found his voice, at last. `What confounded betrayal is this?' he bellowed. He took two steps towards his accuser.

And she fell, as would a puppet with its strings abruptly slashed. She thrashed about and squealed and babbled streams of words in which only the minister's name was discernible. Parris leapt back from her. Abigail's face was a mask of horror. Even the Doctor seemed alarmed. Mary had given herself over to the hysteria more completely than Susan could ever have done. She felt she ought to do something, but Barbara held her back gently.

`We'll make you a promise,' said the Doctor quietly, as Mary's wails subsided into subdued whimpers. `We are going back to our own.., home. If you allow us to leave now, you will never see any of us again. But if we are captured...'

`We'll make sure you go to the gallows with us,' said Ian, making plain the threat that his companion had left unvoiced.

The Reverend Parris was crestfallen. His face was ashen.

`You have left me no choice. I must make a deal with Satan, if I am to preserve my own soul.'

`Believe what you wish,' said the Doctor.
He made for the door, but Susan called to him:

`Grandfather!' He stopped and turned. She moved to Mary's side, took her hand and helped her to her feet. He knew what she was thinking; she could see it. His eyes narrowed and he tilted his head back. She was prepared for an argument. Wondering if she could still muster the energy for one.

`I would prefer to stay,' said Mary in a small voice.

`Mary?'

`It is a kind offer you would make, Susan, and I am sorely tempted. But my life is here and I will not run from it.'

`Are you sure?'

She nodded. Susan didn't know what to feel. Pride, perhaps, that Mary Warren had learned how to fight for herself. Despair, certainly, at the life to which she was abandoning her. But, as she had said, it was her life. Her decision. Her future.

`Then it is settled,' said the Doctor. He swept briskly out of the parsonage. `Come along, Susan, come along!' Ian shrugged helplessly and followed him. Barbara lingered in the doorway.

Susan enveloped Mary in one last hug. `Things do get better,' she whispered as they reluctantly disentangled themselves. `It does end.' She glared at Parris, who was watching them sullenly. `And as for you, you'd better not mistreat her - or else we will be back!'

She paused for a quick backward glance on the threshold.

Then she stepped out of the parsonage and joined her friends. And left Salem Village behind for ever.

8 September 1742

The history book lay open on the beach. An anachronism. Its pages fluttered in the soft breeze that drifted in from the water. Ian let that same breeze cool his face. He stretched out on the hot sand and sheltered his eyes from the sun. The cramped conditions of Salem Prison were a distant, unreal memory. He was deeply fatigued.

Barbara sat beside him, sifting golden grains through her fingers. 'We needed this, didn't we? Time to unwind and reflect. Especially you and Susan. I can't imagine half of what you both went through.'

'The TARDIS takes us to where we need to be, again.'

'I hadn't thought of it that way.'

Ian grinned. 'It could be a coincidence, of course. Or perhaps there's an army of Daleks waiting behind the dunes.'

'I wonder where Susan is.'

'She went for a long walk. Don't worry about her, Barbara. She has a lot to think about and she wants to be alone. She'll get over it.'

'Yes. I remember how I felt after Mexico.'

'I hate to admit it, but the Doctor was right again.'

'Was he?'

Ian sensed a serious conversation in the offing. He lifted himself up on to his elbows. 'We couldn't change anything, no matter how hard we tried - and we all tried! I guess history was just meant to be.'

'But we did change some things. Nothing grand, I'll grant you - but you read about John Proctor, didn't you?' Barbara picked up the book and flicked through it as if planning to

quote from the relevant passage. Ian had already seen it.

`The letter, you mean?'

`Yes, the letter. His plea to the clergy. You encouraged Proctor to write that, Ian - and it helped to bring the witch-hunt to an end.'

`But no sooner than we expected it to end. No fewer people died.

`So what are you saying? That John Proctor's letter was destined to be written? That history already took account of our interference?'

`Why shouldn't it? From a certain point of view, we'd already done everything we did in Salem before we even left London, two hundred and seventy years later.' Ian tossed the idea about in his head, and found it disturbing. Could they take no action that wasn't predetermined?

`But surely, if we had read about it first, we could have done things differently. We could have deliberately cheated Destiny.'

`I don't know. Perhaps John would have written his letter without our help. He had the idea before I came along, you know.'

`It didn't do him much good, either.'

`No.' He had read that page, too. On 19 August 1692, John Proctor had been hanged. Ironically, his wife, for whom he had sacrificed his freedom, had been granted a reprieve. Even William Stoughton had been loath to condemn an innocent, unborn child. The thought churned up all manner of weird sensations for Ian. He had shared one of the most trying experiences of his life with Proctor, but still hardly knew him. He had been so close to him a few days ago, and yet his fate was already a musty old chapter in the chronicle

of a long-gone time.

`It makes you wonder how different things could have been,' said Barbara. `What if we had rescued him? Or Rebecca? Would it have changed things for the better, or for the worse?'

`Any number of factors could have ended the witch-hunt. Some would have been more important than others.'

`It's like picking a thread out of a tapestry. If you're lucky, it might just come free. If not, it might unwind the whole picture. Ian, how could we have lived with ourselves if we'd saved one person only to cause dozens - hundreds - of others to die?'

`Do you really think that could have happened?'

`Yes, I do. I think it is possible to have an effect, and the Doctor is terrified of it. I haven't told you, Ian: when he went to Boston... I think he... well, he...'

`What is it?'

`Rebecca's pardon was granted, you know.'

Ian sat up, brow furrowed. He was beginning to work out where this was going. He didn't like it.

`I read about it in the book. Francis rode back to Salem Village thinking his wife had been spared. But somebody had already been to the Governor and changed his mind.'

Ian hardly dared ask the question. `Who?'

`The book doesn't say.'

`Well, the crafty old devil!' He didn't know if it was worth getting angry. Somehow, the whole thing seemed so inevitable. `No wonder he was so keen on going to Boston instead of me.'

`We might be wrong. He did seem concerned.'

`Oh, I'll just bet he was!'

'I did think about confronting him, but... oh well, you know what he can be like. And we have no real proof.'
Barbara sighed. `Is this what it's going to be like all the time? I don't know if I want to go on visiting the past if we can only watch; if we're helpless to do anything when it matters.'

`Perhaps we aren't,' said Ian thoughtfully. `There's one person whose life isn't mapped out in that book.' His companion's expression was blank, so he provided the information for her: `Mary Warren.'

`Susan's friend?'

`Precisely. They spent a lot of time together - and from what we saw at the end there, Susan had a very positive influence,'

Barbara smiled at the memory. 'I suppose she did,'

`But there's no record of what happened to her after 1692.'

`Do you think..

`We might be allowed one little victory?'

`One change for the better,'

`If it doesn't affect history,' said Ian, '! don't see why not,'

`Better not tell the Doctor,' said Barbara with a giggle. `He'll pop back to Salem and put things back the way they were, just in case.'

Ian laughed, too. `I'd like to see him try.' He became more solemn as a twinge in the small of his back reminded him

of the reality behind their conjecture. No, more than that. Once, just once, I'd like to see him get involved with somebody; have to do something he doesn't like for the sake of the time stream or whatever. I think we might get a very different story out of him then.'

He didn't recall dimming the lights. Perhaps the TARDIS had done so itself, reacting to his mood. He sat in his armchair in the console room and thought about all that had happened in Salem. The Doctor, alone. As, ultimately, he knew he would always be.

He couldn't expect them to understand what he had done to Rebecca Nurse. Couldn't expect them to condone the vow he had made and broken. He hadn't meant to do it. He had fooled himself into thinking he could make things all right for her. Stupid old man: befriending a stranger, giving her false hope. Arranging her death behind her back. He hadn't had the courage to defy time. He had been afraid of it.

There was nothing he could do for her now. Just put the whole thing from his mind. Unfinished business. A weight upon his conscience. A lesson for his future. He had even disabled the fast-return switch. Not before time. It had almost destroyed the Ship once. Without it, this latest bothersome escapade could not have occurred. He had warned Susan about the hurt that planning to change the past could bring. Who would have dreamed so much of that hurt would be his own?

With a heavy sigh, the Doctor clambered to his feet. At first he felt ancient and fragile, and he used his cane for support. The lights rose, anticipating his new-found purpose. He swept his cloak back over his shoulders and took his post at the console. It would be time to leave soon. Time to call his companions back. Their wounds would have lessened, though they might never heal. One more rift between him and the two teachers. One more incident to drive his grandchild away.

Perhaps he could atone for it. He had not told them yet, but this last journey had not been made at random. Fifty years forward in time, with no spatial dislocation. At least, none to speak of. He had made it, almost to the nearest month. The Ship was operating more efficiently than it had done since he had appropriated it. He was ready to try a larger jump. A more important one.

He could take Ian and Barbara home. This time, he was sure of it.

Barring any small problems, of course.

PART FIVE

INNOCENT BLOOD

14 January 1693

A cold winter sun cast shafts of light through the parsonage windows. A year had passed, but the room was unchanged. Its constancy through turmoil churned up conflicting emotions in Mary's heart. It seemed an age ago that five girls had sat around this large oak table, laughing as they cast their ill-advised spells. An age ago, but the spectres of those happy, carefree children seemed close enough to touch. It was difficult to imagine how she could ever have been one of them. Abigail was crying. Mary held on to her and allowed her to sob into her chest. Another strange sensation. She had hated the minister's niece, not such a long time ago. She had been the shrieking, venomous leader of the accusers. But the blame was not all hers. Abigail was truly damned, though whether by occult forces or by the pressures of Puritan life and her own fears and desires, Mary did not know. Hatred had become sympathy, and the understanding of a newly-grown adult.

`Why do you still go to the court, if it upsets you so?'

`It is in the hope of seeing justice done,' said Abigail tearfully. `But they are undoing our good work, allowing the witches to roam free and hurt us. Mary, I could not suffer their torments again.'

Mary pushed her away gently and spoke in a firm tone.

`Then do not allow them to afflict you, Abigail. It is in your power alone.'

`I cannot make them stop. Only iron and the rope can do that!'

`It is a delusion, Abigail. The others have accepted it.'

`You are deceived by Satan. Oh please, Mary, tell them you are deceived. Save us from this terrible mistake.'

`They will not listen to us now. They require more proof than we can give before they will believe claims of sorcery.'
`Mr Stoughton will listen. He believes us yet. Oh, Mary, please!'

Abigail was begging now, but Mary felt only pity for her. Her part had been played. The veil of madness had been lifted from Salem, its sins examined in the cold light of sanity. Abigail's time would not come again. She was left only with her own grief.

`I have no choice but to leave,' said Mary. `You must understand that.' Because she had reason to grieve, too. The witch-hunt had ended, but its cessation had not been sudden. There had been two more mass hangings. John Proctor had died in the first. By a miracle, his wife had been spared. Her baby had been born into a prison cell - but, with fresh reprieves issuing from Governor Phips's office almost daily, it was certain that both mother and son would be freed. Happy as the prospect made her, Mary did not want to be present on that day. How could she face Goodwife Proctor, live in her household, after all that had happened? After all the pain she had caused? She had packed her bag, pausing only to see Abigail on her way out of Salem Village. Towards a new life.

`Leave me then, if you must,' said the younger girl sullenly. 'I had hoped to help you first, as another once helped me. But you cannot be helped if you will not let go of this hatred. You must accept the past and look forward to a future for yourself.'

`I lost what future I had when we conjured up the Devil.'

`I pray it is not true, Abigail.'

The rest of the colony can forget what demons have beset us, but I cannot. I can never be at peace.'

Mary picked up her bag and left then, because there was nothing else for her to do. She would not forget Salem Village, but she could take some comfort from the fact that she had grown up there at last. She had learned to be independent; even helped to end the witch-hunt, in a small way. She had resisted Abigail's forceful personality more often, told less frequent and smaller lies when forced to lie at all. She had coaxed ever more incredible stories out of the other girls, even had them accuse a minister's wife. She had helped to discredit their testimony, to make the judiciary think again about spectral evidence.

She would keep her promise to Abigail. She would pray that she too might find contentment. She would pray for Susan also, without whose strength and kindness she would have remained afflicted herself; become, like Abigail, lost and embittered. She wondered where her friend was now. She knew that, wherever, she would be making a life for herself.

That was what Mary Warren had to do. She would start by walking into town and buying passage on the first cart out. Anywhere would do. She didn't know where fate would lead her, but it would be to a better place than she was leaving. Because, this time, she would be in charge of her own destiny. No longer a prisoner.

Mary Warren cast off history's chains and headed into the future.

Today

The Crucible again. The Doctor shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He remembered Susan's reaction to the play. There were tears on Rebecca Nurse's cheeks, but she did not turn away. She watched the actors intently. Perhaps she prayed for a happy ending; for her fellows to turn away from their insane path. When the final curtain dropped, she didn't join in the applause. He wondered if he had made another mistake. She didn't understand yet. She would.

They strolled back to the TARDIS side by side. She kept her distance from him. An invisible cocoon had sprung up around her: a shell of loneliness, misery and regret. She didn't belong here in this time, couldn't fit in with these people. She shouldn't have seen her own life, portrayed by an actor. Shouldn't have seen her own death.

`How do you feel?' he asked at the doors.

She shook her head mutely. He waited.

`It grieves me to witness so much destruction,' she said at last. `I had hoped for my fate to bring an end to it. I am an old woman, I have not many years to lose. But I pray for the other victims.'

`There was an end,' said the Doctor. `The witch-hunters realised what they had done. It just took a little more time.'

`How much time? How many people died?'

There was no way to avoid the question. He hoped she could deal with the answer. `Nineteen were hanged. One was pressed to death for refusing to give testimony. Several died in prison.' It was a small toll, almost insignificant from this point in time. It wasn't the deaths for which Salem was remembered. But to Rebecca's ears it must have sounded like a massacre. A culling of her friends. A shadow passed across her eyes. She drew a deep, shuddering breath.

`Why was there no mention of your family's contribution?' she asked, composing herself remarkably. `Of

your granddaughter's, at least.'

'History can be blind. When it needs to be. But that isn't why I brought you here. It isn't what I wished you to learn.'

'I do not see what I am expected to gain from being shown these horrors. You say you cannot spare my church from them?'

'I'm afraid not.'

'Then I would like to return.'

'Not yet. Please. Trust me.'

He took her to the small town of Danvers, Massachusetts. It bore scant resemblance to the Salem Village of three hundred years past. Progress had brought tarmac, fast cars and litter to its streets. The Doctor knew that, compared with most developed places on Earth, it was quiet and beautiful, but to Rebecca it must have seemed an abomination.

The town still offered some havens from the modern world. It was to one of these that the Doctor headed. A tranquil, sloping field, bordered by gently waving trees. In the centre of it stood Rebecca Nurse's home. It had weathered the lonely centuries with pride. Later occupants had added to it, but Rebecca cried when she saw that her two rooms and lean-to extension had been lovingly preserved. He could imagine how poignant it must have seemed to her. Amid a barrage of the unfamiliar, it was her first real touchstone to all she had lost; a testament to the passage of time, in which her life had been swept along and buried. It could do her no good to dwell on its presence. He ushered her onward, down towards the family graveyard. One monument towered above the rest. The Doctor's pace slowed as they approached it. It was wrong to show this to anybody. Cruel and possibly harmful. But Rebecca knew what awaited her already. She had seen the story of her life spelled out from beginning to end. How could it

hurt her to see what happened next?

And then it was too late for second thoughts, though there was time enough to fret as the Doctor awaited the consequences of a desperate act. Rebecca's face froze as she read the name carved into the white obelisk above a touching eulogy. Her name. She had not guessed, although he had thought his secret writ plain in his features. For an unbearably long time, she gave no other reaction. The Doctor half expected her to scream, to cry, to lose her mind, to bring time crashing down about his ears.

Instead, her eyes shone with awe, but her brow creased with puzzlement. Her voice was hesitant, choked. 'How can it have come to pass that I should have a memorial at all, much less one so grand?'

'I can think of few more deserving.'

'Yet is it not the fate of the executed to lie in unmarked graves?'

'My dear Rebecca, your family and friends thought more of you than that. A good deal more. They risked all to move your body; to give it a proper and dignified burial in secret.'

'But this stone?'

'The tribute of a future generation. They knew what wrong had been done to you. They did all in their power to put things right.'

'My... excommunication?' He could see how difficult it was for her to ask. How painful it was to hope.

'Rescinded,' he confirmed, and smiled at the beatific expression that washed over her.

'Then I may hope for a seat in Heaven after all?'

'I am sure it was never in doubt.'

He took her to the second memorial then: the larger one that stood across the road from the unrecognisable site where once the meetinghouse had been. She knelt before it, straining her weakened eyes to read. The Doctor leaned on his cane and watched in silence.

In memory of those innocents who died during the Salem Village witchcraft Hysteria of 1692

She remained there for the longest of times, conflicting emotions vying for control of her face. He thought it best not to disturb her, though he began to wonder if she could ever understand.

At last, she stood awkwardly and walked around the fine stone monument. She stroked its rough surface with reverence. She circled it twice and read the immortalised quotations of the witchcraft victims, including one of her own. She returned to the frontispiece and gazed at the simple inscription there a second time. A third. And she whispered. ~Innocents.

`As I told you, the truth was eventually recognised.'
`They remember us,' said Rebecca. `Though three centuries have passed, they know what was done to us. They remember... me.'

He had shown her where it had started. Finally, he took her to where it had all ended. For too many people. At first, Rebecca didn't think much of the developments in Salem Town. She complained of the noise, the crowds, the tainted smell of the air. She visibly flinched from the silhouettes of stereotypical witches with hats and broomsticks, which advertised shops and restaurants and were emblazoned across T-shirts. Witchcraft had become a tourist industry; visitors were attracted by tales of the trials and by the occult connotations that still clung to Salem's name.

`I had hoped for a better future,' said Rebecca in disgust.

`This time still has its vultures and its voyeurs. They will

flock to any spectacle, taking cruel delight in the misfortunes of others.'

'It must seem that way to you,' said the Doctor carefully.

'How else do you explain the play?'

'To these people, it was a long time ago.'

'Does that make it a source of pleasure?'

'Perhaps simply of historical interest.'

They found peace atop Gallows Hill. They sat on damp grass there and the sounds of traffic receded, though white clapboard houses and red-brick apartment blocks had stolen the ocean view. The Doctor felt the sweet breeze in his hair, and again he remembered sitting here with Susan. A lifetime ago.

For a few minutes, Rebecca was unsettled. She kept glancing at the trees, as if trying to work out from which of them a rope had once hung. Her personal future, to which she still had to return. But, as the Doctor had hoped, the perspective offered to her by this future helped to overcome such apprehension.

'How does it end?' she asked at last. The play had not furnished her with that information.

He thought about it, wondering how much to say. A growing discontent. The villagers became displeased with the court - remorseful, even, for what they had allowed it to do. John Proctor helped: he wrote letters, made speeches and argued against the witch-hunt. A lot of people thought he was making sense. And then there was George Burroughs, who recited the Lord's Prayer as they sent him to his death - a supposed impossibility for a witch; Giles Corey, who was killed without trial when he wouldn't speak in the court. And Rebecca Nurse, who comported

herself with such grace and dignity that few doubted her innocence at the end.'

'I am to become a martyr, then.' Her voice was steeped in disbelief 'I am to play a part in the future, so long as people still think of me and remember.'

'They will always remember what happened in Salem Village.'
'And 'tis good that they will recognise it as a madness of sorts:

'Do you understand now?'

She nodded. I hope I do. When first we met, Doctor, I warned you against those who would fear us for our differences, whether real or not. It was such people who, gripped by a delusion, committed great sins against the Lord. And yet the trials of Salem have not been in vain if they can live on in memory and be a caution to those who are still to come. Mankind will learn tolerance and understanding from our sad example, so hope can flourish anew.' She smiled, for the first time since he had taken her from the dungeon. I am blessed to have become a part of history.'

'This world is blessed to have known you.'

'I am ready to go now, Doctor.'

He laid a reassuring hand on her shoulder and helped her to stand. His risk had paid off. He had done the right thing; laid a few personal ghosts to rest. Ian and Barbara had never understood. They had left him at the first opportunity, taking their own transport back to their own time. His granddaughter had left too. And all the people since. He had never really tried to explain to them. He had wanted to explain to somebody, at last. He had wanted to achieve some closure; perhaps to expunge his guilt.

But a small part of the guilt remained, Nagging doubts. He had not shown Rebecca everything. What if she could learn all about this strange new world? What if she came to

understand too much? What price his absolution, if he had had to deceive her to achieve it?

Nobody noticed as they left. Nobody heard Rebecca's blissful sigh of contentment, drifting on the wind even when she could no longer be seen by mortal eyes. The sun set in that part of the world, on that balmy evening. Elsewhere, the latest witch-hunts continued. People still died because others thought themselves different or better.

Or perhaps because they were afraid.

Rebecca Nurse went to her final rest with calm acceptance.

Life, for the rest of us, goes on.